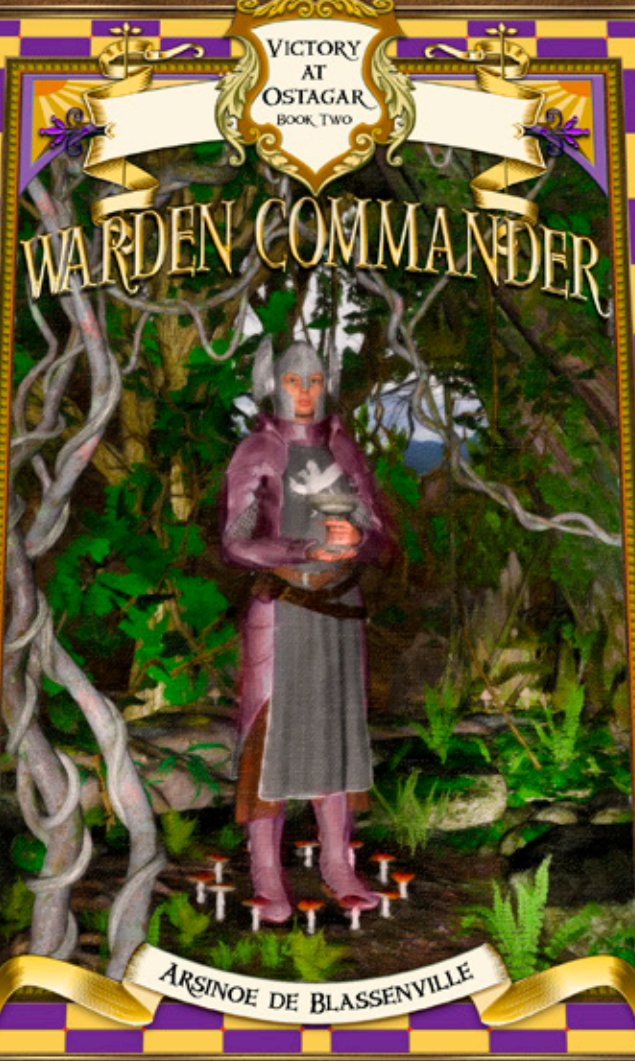


ADVENTURES IN FANFICTION

VICTORY
AT
OSTAGAR
BOOK TWO

WARDEN COMMANDER

ARSINOE DE BLASSEVILLE



A RED HEN PUBLICATION



AN ADVENTURES IN FANFICTION EDITION

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WARDEN COMMANDER

VICTORY AT OSTAGAR

VOLUME TWO

BY

ARSINOE DE BLASSEVILLE



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WARDEN COMMANDER

CHAPTER I



A TYPICAL NIGHT IN DENERIM

"O YOU ALL RETURN," Morrigan drawled. "I confess to a certain surprise."

"Yes, we're all here and all Wardens and all fine." Bronwyn assured her, a bit shortly. There was a great deal to do, and not much time to do it in.

Anders smirked. "You missed a terrific party, Morrigan. And presents."

Morrigan glanced at the griffon tabards and rolled her eyes.

In truth, the new Wardens had taken the bad news far better than Bronwyn had hoped. The increased appetite, the nightmares, even the infertility did not seem to particularly distress them. Bronwyn was surprised, as the last was the aspect of being a Grey Warden that she found most troubling. Perhaps because there were now eight of them, and more would presumably be recruited, the fact that one of them must die to kill the Archdemon did not seem so immediate and terrifying. Cullen, in fact, almost... *brightened*... at the news, speaking reverently of a such a noble sacrifice. Leliana, too, had seemed very touched.

"It's like Andraste," she breathed, "giving her life for the whole world."

"We're only here for tonight," Bronwyn told her party. "We'll move out early tomorrow. I'll finish my letters, and the Commander has promised to send out a courier immediately. If anyone here has a letter for anyone in the army at Ostagar, get it to me immediately, and I'll include it with my own."

There followed visits to the quartermaster, to the farrier, to the smith, to the leather worker. Bronwyn's armor was in deplorable condition, and she had the armorer do what he could to repair it.

When she returned from her errands, Morrigan met her, obviously wanting a quiet word.

"Our party will divide, I understand. You are going to Denerim."

"I am, but I will not be gone long."

"That is perhaps wise of you. Were you planning to take a mage with you on your adventure?"

Bronwyn looked at her searchingly. "I was planning to take you."

"I do not wish to go," Morrigan informed her. "I am instructing Anders in shape-shifting, and his training ought not to be interrupted. In his impatience, he may attempt a hazardous change, and without supervision, that could be fatal." She raised a black and perfect brow.

"I...see." Bronwyn thought she did. Morrigan and Anders

were engaged in some sort of flirtation. If it included magical instruction, this was the first Bronwyn had heard of it. She had no power to command this woman to do something she obviously did not want to do, and her usefulness would be compromised if she went unwillingly.

She shrugged. "Very well, then. I shall take Tara with me, instead. You and Anders will be under Alistair's command." She smiled faintly at the witch's grimace, and turned away. In fact, she decided, her mind sorting through the changed scenario, Tara might actually be better for her purposes...

Their supplies had cost quite a bit. Riordan had been generous with his time and information – even with the new tabards – but Bronwyn would have appreciated an infusion of gold. However, that was another reason to go to Denerim. Trying to access the Warden Compound would not be prudent, if she wanted her mission to remain secret. However, there was the cache in the Market District, and Riordan had told her that there was some coin to be had there.

She sat down at the rough table and scratched out a cover note for her enormous letter to Fergus.

Dear brother—

I am well and safe. The massive amount of parchment enclosed is as much a journal of my daily adventures as it is a letter to you. Nonetheless, I offer it for what it is worth. No, I have not told you everything, for the Wardens will have their secrets, as winter will have snow, and the dwarves their ale. I



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have tasted dwarven ale, by the way, and do not recommend it.

The King will be pleased to know that the Grey Wardens of Ferelden are now eight in number... or nine if one includes Scout, who is probably the best of us! The dwarves have agreed to honor their treaty, and are moving south to join with our own army.

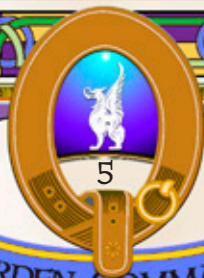
Orzammar was in absolute chaos when I arrived, with the factions cutting throats in the very streets. You will no doubt be horrified to know that it was left to your little sister to sort out the muddle. It involved falsified documents, cleaning out the sprawling lair of a criminal organization, and penetrating far into the Deep Roads to find a madwoman. I learned a great deal — more, I think, than I wanted to. At any rate, I returned with a crown made by a Paragon, with which I crowned the King of my choice before the assembled deshys. It was an astonishing scene, but I have written of it in greater detail in my journal. Bhelen may not be the best king for the dwarves, but he is the best ally for Ferelden.

I also saw the Archdemon. I will not say more of that now. That, too, is in that bundle of parchment.

I think of you often, and pray that you, too, are well. I am doing all I can to raise Ferelden's allies against the Blight, and there is yet more to be done.

She decided to let him know a little of what concerned her, and wrote her next paragraphs in their private code.

Father always said that the Orlesians are always up to something, and he was absolutely right. You are not to tell the following to anyone but Teyrn Loghain, for good people would



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suffer were it to be known: I received a kind invitation from the Senior Warden of Jader to meet him at the border. I was to give my reply to the commander of Roc du Chevalier, which would be forwarded to this Senior Warden Riordan. As Alistair and I were ignorant of so much Warden lore, we could see no sense in rejecting the opportunity. For obvious reasons, I left Alistair behind, and went with one of my recruits across the border, where I was greeted in the grand style by the Chevalier du Guesclin. So I have seen the Rock, and it is very great and terrible, and I was glad to put it behind me within an hour.

The next day, I was surprised by the appearance — in disguise — of the Senior Warden and one of his command. They had come secretly over the border to warn us not to return to the Rock, for plans were afoot to abduct us and take us into Orlais, in order to force King Cailan to admit the Orlesians. Senior Warden Riordan got wind of it, and being Ferelden-born — and a Warden faithful to his principles — disliked being made use of in that way, and forestalled a disaster. I learned from him a great deal of Warden lore — everything, in fact, that I hoped for, and know now what Wardens must do to defeat the Archdemon. Only Wardens can, they always said, and now I know why. It is a dark thing, but it will save us all. There are good reasons to consider Riordan and his companion truthful, but I will disclose those to you in person.

The quill's end was wearing down. She took a fresh one, trimmed the tip a little, and wrote the rest without code.

I hope to see you in three weeks or a little less, as the dwarven

army makes it way southeast to Ostagar.

Your loving sister,
Bronwyn

She sat for a moment, deciding if that really was all she had to say. Then she blotted the letter, set it on top of the rest of the parchment, bound the whole together with a wrapping of heavier parchment and string, and marked it for "Teyrn Fergus Cousland."

There were others to apprise of her success. She took a fresh piece of parchment, and wrote carefully.

My lord Teyrn —

Bhelen is King in Orzammar, and the dwarven army is on the march.

She paused, smiling to herself. After a moment, her quill resumed its scratching, giving numbers, dispositions, routes.

— with a contingent of the Legion of the Dead, a thousand in number, led by their Commander Kardol himself. These will travel by the Deep Roads to the Belannas entrance noted on the map enclosed.

We hope to reach Ostagar within three weeks, weather and darkspawn permitting.

My companions and I saw the Archdemon in that portion of the Deep Roads called Bownammar, otherwise known as the Dead Trenches. The creature was at some distance, but there was no doubt as to what it was.

Our neighbors have been very busy. Suffice it to say that I have much to tell you that I cannot entrust to writing.

Bronwyn

Another, even shorter letter was written to the King, praising their dwarven allies, and referring to her letter to Teyrn Loghain for the details.

Tara and Cullen had letters for friends at Ostagar. Even Anders had a note for his friend Niall. Morrigan, of course, laughed out loud at the idea of correspondence.

"You are not suggesting, I hope, that I should write to my *mother!*"

When everything was signed and sealed, Bronwyn took them to Commander Roark, who sent a courier out with them immediately. That much was done. She must make plans for her private quest.

Leliana, unsurprisingly, was ready and eager to go. When Bronwyn explained her idea to her, Leliana was delighted, and immediately came up with a half-dozen ways to improve the scheme.

"How lucky that I bought a new gown! But it would be best if I used the name of a real person..."

They worked on the details, and then Bronwyn approached Sten and Zevran, who were both willing to take part. And then...

"Tara," Bronwyn asked quietly. "Can you do magic without your staff?"

"Of course," the girl replied. "The staff is only focuses my magic... it makes it stronger, but it doesn't create it."

"Good." Bronwyn thought a moment. "You are going with

me to Denerim, and since we are going in disguise, I want you to leave your staff behind."

She saw no way around it. There was no way to hide a five-foot-long pole on horseback — or in one's clothes. Magic was too useful not to include a mage in the party, but the trappings of magic were to be avoided.

Next, she must speak again to Alistair. Naturally, he was not entirely satisfied with the scheme.

"You are leaving me *in charge*. *With Morrigan*."

"It can't be helped. Everyone knows we're splitting up. Morrigan came to me and said flatly that she was not going to Denerim, if it meant leaving Anders. She serves voluntarily, and I can't force the issue. I want Anders with you. Ordinarily, Morrigan would be my first choice of mage, but I will take Tara instead. Besides, Tara knows a spell to make the horses go faster and longer, and her own riding is much improved. I cannot take any of the dwarves, for I must ride hard for Denerim. I am going with Tara, Leliana, Zevran, Sten, and Scout. That is all. You will be moving more slowly, marching at the army's pace."

"I still can't believe we're doing this." Alistair looked at her pleadingly. "You could put Cullen in charge."

"No, I cannot. You are in command, and we are all relying on you. Hold fast, and the surfacers will join you in a week. While you are waiting, have the dwarves practice riding, and keep up everyone's archery, just as we agreed." She lowered her voice, and clapped him on the shoulder.

"Your mother is very proud of you, Alistair. You know that. If you cannot do this for me, do it for her."

"Now that's just mean," he complained. Then, thinking about it, he smiled shyly, and gave her a little shrug. Bronwyn laughed, and swatted him on the arm.

They left Gherlen's Halt in good spirits. Rather to Alistair's dismay, there was a suitable boat at the Western Docks, which for a reasonable sum would take them across Lake Calenhad.

"It'll be nearly a week before the dwarves arrive at the Deep Roads entrance," he grumbled. "It's all hurry-up-and-wait!"

Bronwyn patiently explained, "That's a warrior's life for you. But it will shave two days off my own little detour to Denerim. I want to get there, find that bard, get back, and join forces with you before you get to Ostagar. Every day matters!"

Their horses were led carefully onto the boat. The dwarves marched as if to their doom: Astrid rigidly stoic, Oghren rumbling curses, and Brosca shooting wild looks over the side.

"First no stone over our heads, and now no stone under our feet!" she muttered rather desperately. "No stone at all!" The three of them huddled by a bulwark, looking as if they were under attack. It had not occurred to Bronwyn until then how alien and unpleasant travel over water would be to them. The rest of the companions sprawled comfortably on deck, free of their duties for the moment. Morrigan and Anders quietly discussed a gull that had alighted on the

yardarm. Tara and Zevran whispered together. Tara giggled, and then burst out laughing. Cullen watched them, eyes shadowed. Alistair leaned over the rail, brooding.

"Alistair!" Bronwyn approached him, and then beckoned Cullen over. Quickly, she murmured to the two big men, "I've made something of a blunder. I really did not think about how distressing this would be for our dwarven companions. I've got to do some planning with my Denerim party, so could the two of you sit with the dwarves and try to distract them? There's that keg of ale we brought. How about a round of drinks and some talk? They look like cornered rabbits."

Being kindhearted men, they had no trouble doing as they were asked. Brosca looked more cheerful in no time. Cup of ale in her hand, she wriggled nearer to Cullen, sitting as close as she could without actually sitting on his lap. Cullen blushed, but did not push her away.

The ship scudded before the wind, making good time. Bronwyn briefed her chosen companions on their mission. She had already spoken to Leliana about their disguise, and knew that an experienced former bard would have no trouble at all in falling in with her plans.

Leliana said, "I shall take my Chantry robe along. I shall look very inconspicuous in it, just as I did in Lothering!"

Anders overheard that last, and laughed. "Now that's something I just can't see. I can't picture someone like you as a Chantry sister!"

Leliana turned indignant blue eyes on him. "What do you mean — someone like me?"

"Oh, I don't know..." Anders smirked. "Aside from the deadeye archer thing and the daggers, there's the fact that you're a beautiful young woman!"

Leliana came up to him, hands on hips, and stared him in the face. "As a matter of fact, there were many young and beautiful women at the Lothering Chantry!"

Zevran laughed. "It is true, my friend. You cannot win your argument by claiming that the Chantry is home only to the old and ugly. In Antiva, the beauty of Chantry sisters is fabled in song and story."

"What story?" Tara instantly demanded.

Zevran laughed and shrugged expressively, "Well..."

"Ha! Zevran wants to tell a story!" Tara called out, clapping her hands. "Story! Story!"

People were looking around in pleasure and interest.

The handsome elf smiled, flashing white teeth. "Well... if you insist... I do know a story about the Sisters of Antiva."

"I don't like the sound of this..." Alistair muttered.

"Oh, Alistair!" Bronwyn waved a hand. "How bad can it be? Besides, he can claim Minstrel's Privilege. We all need a diversion. Go on, Zevran, tell your tale."

The elf looked very amused. He rose, bowed elaborately, and began to speak.

ZEVRAN'S STORY OF GROUNDSKEEPER MAHAL AND THE CHANTRY SISTERS:

My friends, there are indeed people foolish enough to believe that, once a girl has assumed the robes of the Chantry, that she is no longer a woman. As though by taking a vow, she has turned to stone! And if those people hear anything contrary to this belief, they rage with fury, as if an unnatural sin had been committed, when indeed nothing could farther from the truth.

There is in Antiva the city of Treviso, famed for its wine, its abundant flowers, and its lovely women. Ah, Treviso! The veiled ladies lean over their balconies and sing to the lute in the twilight! All except, of course, the ladies of a famous Chantry on the outskirts of the city. I shall not tell you its name, lest I detract from its reputation for piety!

Some years ago, there were eight Sisters in this Chantry, ruled by their Revered Mother, and their magnificent garden was kept by an elf named Nuto. He had grown old in their service, so old that he wished to retire to the Alienage. His wages were paid, and he returned to his childhood home, where he fell in with his great-nephew, the sturdy and handsome Mahal.

"Where have you been all these years, Great-Uncle?" asked Mahal, as they sat on a bench in the sun, drinking wine.

"Oh, I was groundskeeper for the Chantry outside the walls, and used to tend the fine, big garden there. I would carry water, fetch wood, do odd jobs. But those women drove me crazy! The worst

of it was that they were all young and full of mischief — even the Revered Mother, who is not even thirty! Nothing I did suited them. This one would say, 'Plant that rose here!' and another would grab the spade out of my hand, and shout, 'That's no good!' and another would say, 'Why have you not thinned the carrots, you stupid old elf?' By the Maker, I am too old for such tricks! I got sick of it and now I shall live in peace, far from the Maker's Brides."

"You just left them?" asked Mahal. "Left them to manage on their own?"

"That I did!" said Nuto with great satisfaction. "Even though they begged me to stay in the end, and the Revered Mother told me that I was always welcome to come back, or if I would not, to recommend someone else."

Mahal smiled, for a wonderful idea had come to him. He was filled with a tormenting desire to take care of those Sisters and cultivate their garden: to plow it, and water it, and fertilize it as soon as he possibly could.

He was not without experience in such work, and yet he knew he might well be rejected, even with his great-uncle's recommendation, for he was young and handsome. He cudged his brains for a way to be accepted and then he hit on it. If he were a poor, mute, simple fellow, unable to speak, surely the Revered Mother would take pity on him and give him the post of groundskeeper.

"Why not?" he thought to himself. "No one knows me there. I shall write a recommendation for myself on my uncle's behalf — and he cannot read, so I can say anything I like!"

No sooner said than done. He wrote the saddest story ever put



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to parchment for the Revered Mother, and his great-uncle signed it without even asking Mahal to read it to him first, for the afternoon was warm and the wine was heavy. Mahal packed a bag with his linen and his tools, rolled up his recommendation, and went his way to seek his fortune.

He came to the famous Chantry with its walled garden and rang the little bell. The sister on duty came — a dark-eyed beauty with lustrous locks like clusters of grapes — and she asked the young elf his business. He, with a timid dumb-show, made gestures that he could not speak, and gave her the little parchment that sang his praises as a gardener and hard worker, and his virtues as a meek and modest servant. The sister was not sure what to do, but led him to the Revered Mother, who was busily at work in her office. She was a tall and beautiful young woman, of a noble household that had lost its fortune and influence, and she had been sold to the Chantry at the age of twelve to pay the family's debts.

She asked the Sister who he was, and the sister replied, "Your Reverence, this is a poor mute boy, the great-nephew of dear old Nuto. He is an orphan and penniless, and Nuto prays that you will give him the post of groundskeeper here, for otherwise he shall surely starve."

Mahal looked very sad, and he thought so much about what a shame it would be if the Revered Mother did not let him stay, that tears filled his eyes, and the lady's heart was touched.

"Very well," she relented. "Show him the gardening shed with the quarters next door where old Nuto slept." She turned to Mahal, and spoke slowly and loudly, as if he were deaf and stupid as well



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as mute, saying, "I hope you will work as hard as your dear uncle!"

Mahal grinned and bobbed his head, thinking about how hard he hoped to work. He was shown his quarters and his work, and set to with a will. He thought, "I'll show them gardening like they've never seen!"

He worked very hard indeed, cutting wood, weeding in the garden, fetching water for the sisters: working tirelessly and without complaint. It was clear that he could work twice as hard for twice as long as his old great-uncle. The garden bloomed like never before, and the sisters felt they had done well in trading Nuto for Mahal.

They grew used to him, and then they began to tease him as he worked about the grounds. Sometimes they would address the wickedest little words to him, the way people do with deaf-mutes, confident that they were not understood.

One day, he was chopping wood. It was hot, and he had removed his shirt. Two young sisters stopped to admire his muscular frame, and began talking about him, thinking that he could not hear a word.

"I'll tell you a secret," said one, "if you promise never to breathe a word."

"Oh, I promise," said the other, "I love secrets."

"Well," said the first. "I have heard that there is no greater pleasure than what a woman feels when she lies with a man. I've often thought of that, and I've been thinking recently that there would be no better way to try it out than with Mute Mahal!"

"Oh, Sister!" cried her friend. "What are you saying? Have you



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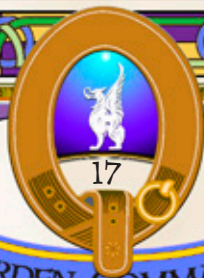
forgotten that we have pledged our chastity to the Maker?"

The first girl said, "There are a thousand things promised to him all day long all over Thedas, and He doesn't get a single one. Besides, there are plenty of girls who will keep their word. Think of it! He's perfect! He can't possibly tell on us, and he's so very pretty. What do you say?"

At that hot time of afternoon, many of the other sisters were taking their rest, and Mahal listened to the girls' discussion, trying not to laugh out loud. In the end, they took him by his hands, and led him back to his own little quarters, soothing and cajoling him with many gestures, while he grinned like a zany. Afterward, when the girls talked the matter over, they agreed it was indeed the delight they had heard of, and more!

From then on, they took every available moment to go frolicking with their deaf-mute groundskeeper. It happened one day that another sister spied on them from her narrow cell window, and called it to the attention of two others. They watched for some time, and whispered that it must be reported to the Revered Mother, but then, changing their mind, they came to an understanding with the first girls, and they too enjoyed their share of the groundskeeper's attentions.

As time went on, every sister in the Chantry was in on the secret. The Revered Mother wondered at the happy faces about her, fresh and pink as their climbing roses. At length one day, as she walked in their beautiful garden. Mahal was sleeping under an arbor, for between tending to the garden and tending to the girls he was often tired. He looked so young and handsome



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that the lonely Revered Mother's heart hurt for all that had been taken from her, and she was tempted beyond her resistance. She awakened him, and swept him away to her cell, and kept him there several days, to the consternation of the other sisters.

Finally she released him, but was not fully satisfied, and she became so demanding that Mahal became exhausted with the efforts of the maintaining the garden and satisfying nine women. So one night, when he was with the Revered Mother, he suddenly spoke.

"My lady, I've heard that one cock is enough for ten hens, but that ten men could hardly toil hard enough to please a single woman. As for me, I have nine women to work for, and it's just too much. I give up. Let me go, for the Maker's sake."

The young woman's jaw dropped. "I thought you were mute!"

"So I was," Mahal assured her. "But no more. It must a miracle, wrought by living here in this holy place!"

The Revered Mother was silent a moment, thinking very fast, for all was now clear to her, and she knew she must be very wise to avoid disaster.

So Mahal was given a goodly sum of gold, and the sisters and their Revered Mother bid him farewell with tears in their eyes. He went home to the Alienage, and used his capital wisely, and with some generosity. A fine public fountain was built in the center of the Alienage, where all could go to for clean water. Mahal married well, and fathered many pretty children, and everyone agreed that his garden was the finest the Alienage had ever seen. He himself attributed this to his useful experiences as a Chantry groundskeeper.



Zevran smirked at the various reactions. Cullen's face was red with rage. "I don't believe any such thing ever happened! You slander the Chantry!"

Brosca caught him by the arm, and was dragged along a few feet. She said, "Well, it's a different country isn't it? Maybe they do things differently there!"

"That's right," Alistair agreed reluctantly, "It is *Antiva* he's talking about."

Leliana pointed out primly, "In Orlais and Ferelden, the Chantry is always careful to appoint Revered Mothers of mature years. And there are always Templars to protect them. And we all know that there are sometimes people who cannot keep their vows!"

The mages were still laughing. "That was great," sighed Anders, with heart-felt satisfaction.

Sten only grunted, his suspicions of Andrasteian hypocrisy confirmed.

The dwarves had been amused by the story too, if only because it was dirty, and made human surfacers look like idiots. Bronwyn hid her own embarrassment, not wanting to appear the sheltered maiden from the backwoods she sometimes felt like. Perhaps she should check out the stories her people told, before they told them to everyone else...

In due course, they arrived at the other side of the lake, and Bronwyn kept their farewells brief and cheerful. Alistair was still very uneasy at the prospect of his first

command, and plagued her with his questions and concerns while she readied her own party for departure.

"Well," he sighed, running out of ways to delay the inevitable. "Don't get killed. That would be really disappointing. All right?"

She squeezed his arm. "All right."

They cantered off, and as they had previously agreed, stopped four miles away, near a stream marked on the map, not far from the River Dane Road. There, changes were made. No one in Denerim needed to know that the Wardens were in the city.

The River Dane Road was a green and mossy trail that led through the heart of the Bannorn, and on it they could gallop straight east to Denerim. The road was not a Tevinter masterwork, and so allowances would have to be made for bad weather; but on horseback, with good luck, they could get to Denerim far faster than on the North Road, where they might run afoul of Rendon Howe's forces.

Startled farmers backed away as the mounted party galloped past.

"Nobles," grumbled an old woman. "Always have to make a show of themselves."

"Fine horses, though," a red-haired plowman observed.

His brother grunted, "Too good for them knife ears!"

They were still worth watching, though: the black-haired noblewoman in the costly blue gown, big mabari

hound running at her stirrup, her elf maidservant in a better dress than even the freeholder's wife dreamed of owning. An elf manservant, too, and two guards, one of them a giant of a man on a huge warhorse.

"Ought to have him down south in the Army. Looks like he could fight them darkspawn all by himself!"

The riders took the turn at Green Springs Road, and melted into the trees. The farmers went back to work.

"I am Lady Vera Porodolin," the self-assured aristocrat informed the admiring barkeep, "and I require lodging for myself and my retinue."

The Gnawed Noble, quite the finest establishment in Denerim, was completely at the lady's service and that of her plentiful gold coin. A large suite – on the ground floor – was available. The lady was from Ostwick, it transpired, which accounted for her pretty accent, and she had come to Ferelden to see after some private business. Taking the hint, she was promised the well-known discretion of the inn. A pair of servants, a pair of guards, and a fine hound were not too large a party to house. A bath was arranged, food was ordered, the horses were stabled, and life at the Gnawed Noble Tavern went on, in its expensively quiet way.

The dark-haired elf servants were good-looking, of course, but that was nothing remarkable. Neither were the two guards: a warrior in shabby chainmail whose visored leather helmet hid her eyes in a professionally

threatening manner, and a big Qunari. Qunari guards were becoming quite the fashion in aristocratic circles. Neither of them said much, which was the mark of reliable bodyguards. The dog was a real charmer. The lady liked to keep to herself. Plenty of ladies did.

The trays of food were brought, the door was shut, and the lady's party left to eat in peace.

Bronwyn removed her helmet, blowing out a breath. Nothing much was said while they inhaled their meal. Over the past few days, they had gone over the plans in detail.

"That was the house, all right," Leliana assured them. "I remember it well." She changed into her Chantry robe, and pulled the elaborate braids out of her hair. "No one notices a Chantry sister in the Market District. I will go along the street, apparently on errands of mercy, and watch the house. There is a corner on the opposite side where I can conceal myself."

"Right," Bronwyn rose, and peered out the window at the street. Now, just after blazing noon, the Market District teemed with life. "Zevran, Sten: position yourselves where we agreed. Listen for all the gossip you can. Tara, you're with me. I'll meet the rest of you opposite the house after sunset."

Leliana slipped out of the inn, avoiding the notice of the maids. The rest of the party went about their business, just as a noble lady's servants ought to.

"This way," Bronwyn muttered to Tara, who nearly walked into the wall as she stepped into the street. The elf



DENERIM: THE MARKET DISTRICT



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looked about in eager delight.

"It's enormous!" she whispered, eyes radiant. "I never imagined a city could be so big! Could we go to the Alienage? Or is it too far? I'm sure I came from the Denerim Alienage, but I don't remember anything about it! Let's go, Bronwyn!"

"Not today," Bronwyn whispered back. "And remember to call me 'Jennet!'" She was not sure she wanted to go there anyway, and deal with Tara's disappointment and horror. Considering what the elf had thought of Dust Town, it was likely that the Alienage would seem far worse, since the inhabitants were her own people.

"What's that?" Tara whispered, pointing to a shop door.

Bronwyn smiled. "The Wonders of Thedas. It's a shop full of things made at the Circle. Amazing stuff, really. Books and magical artifacts..."

"I want to go there!"

"Shh... Maybe we will, but not now."

She had been told how to slip into the unguarded warehouse, and also how to unlock the door to the secret room. Now that Tara was a Warden, it was fitting that she learn this as well.

The warehouse was a jumble of crates and barrels. Bronwyn moved softly, looking about for guards or merchants. Her luck held, and it was deserted. Moving to the back, into a small alcove, she tested the locking mechanism. A harrowing pause, and then the cupboard slid away, revealing a room lit only by a few tiny windowed

holes, too small for anything other than a mouse or the sun's rays to penetrate.

"Scout," she ordered. "If anyone tries to open the front door, let me know and delay them until I can close the room up again."

A quick yip assured her that she was understood. Now, to see what they could find...

"All I have to do is bind my breasts down," Bronwyn told Tara, heady with success. "It's more than I hoped for. With the gold I took, I can go to Master Wade's and fix it up a bit. Wade is the best armorer in Denerim. My father and brother always go to him. I've never been there, so there's no chance he'll recognize me..."

New armor was a cure for low spirits, she discovered. Furthermore, there was far more in the cache – really a good-sized room – than armor and weapons: there were books and foodstuffs. There were cloaks and blankets and tents and scrolls and journals. There were armor stands and weapon stands, and chests filled with treasure and coin. She could carry only little with her, but she took a great deal of the gold, a quiver of fine arrows, and some maps and books, as well as a set of heavy dragonbone chainmail that she was absolutely sure would fit her. In the privacy of their rooms at the Gnawed Noble, Tara helped her into it. There were a few dings, here and there, that needed to be hammered out. The straps needed to be

fastened more tightly than on the previous owner, but that would be no trouble. It was decent armor – better than decent. It was infinitely better than the shabby practice armor that she had worn since the night of the attack on her home. She felt no sentimental attachment to *that* relic.

She dug an awl from her pack, and set about drilling new holes in the straps. Tara stepped out to the bar to ask after a reliable laundress. There was no reason they could not have their linen seen to while they were in Denerim.

Thus it was that Tara carried a basket of dirty shirts and smallclothes out of the Gnawed Noble, with Bronwyn, helmet concealing her identity, trailing along. The innkeeper had recommended the services of one Goldanna, a woman only steps from Master Wade's shop.

The laundress was sharp-tongued but business-like, and agreed to have the lot washed, dried, and ironed by sunset the next day. Tara did the talking, playing the part of the elf maidservant, while Bronwyn lounged by the door, every inch the bored guard.

The laundress said, "If you'd come much later, I couldn't have promised tomorrow, what with the to-do over the King coming back to town, but I'll see you right."

Bronwyn was so surprised that she blurted out, "The King's in town?"

The laundress snorted. "Didn't think you had a tongue in your head. That's right. He's back and a good job for him, too. Got himself wounded down south, and he's

come back so the Queen can give him a bit of cossetting. Not that he don't deserve it, poor soul. It's a hard thing, all this fighting and killing and all them darkspawn. Lucky we've got Teyrn Loghain to look after us."

They moved on to Master Wade's shop, which was as fascinating as she had always imagined. Wade and his shop assistant Herren, however, were not particularly fascinated by her. She was just another bodyguard of just another noble, and Denerim was swarming with them. Wade was only interested in his art, and second-hand heavy chainmail was not a sufficiently challenging project. Luckily, Herren *was* interested in ready cash, and within a few minutes, Wade gave his grumbling consent to make some adjustments to her new armor right away.

"It's worth every copper to me," she assured them. "I'm lucky to come into this. It's so superior to what I've been making do with!"

"Yes, yes, yes," sighed Wade, "Spare me your tale of woe. We've heard them all. Keep an eye on that mabari of yours. I'm not responsible if he singes his tail."

The forge sparked with Wade's hammer blows. Bronwyn watched in amazement at his skill, and Tara crept out of a corner to join her. The alterations Wade was willing to do would be complete by the morning.

"It would do more harm than good to tamper with it further. It is... adequate armor. I suggest you mold yourself to it, rather than demanding it mold itself to you."

"Thank you, Master. And do replace any straps and buckles that are unsound."

Wade and Herren rolled their eyes at each other, and Herren looked askance at the old chainmail that Bronwyn wanted to sell to him. He told her loftily that it was only good for scrap metal, but that he would take it off her hands when she picked up her new armor.

"Might I interest you in a helmet?" Herren ventured, regarding hers with contempt. "I have something quite superior in dragonwing..."

Bronwyn laughed. "I like this style."

"Ah." Wade and Herren exchanged another glance, this time one of complicity. Wade pointed out, "You haven't asked the price of the alterations." Herren tried to hush him.

Wade did mostly custom work, but there was a stock of excellent second-hand pieces. Herren liked her a little better when she found some dragonbone gauntlets that fit her. She caught him discreetly eyeing her weapons, which she knew were uncommonly good for a mere bodyguard. She gave him a cheeky grin. Let him think her a scavenging mercenary, if he liked.

"As such a very good customer," Wade drawled, "I might add some advice. You seem to be new to Denerim. Am I right? Well... keep your little elf friend close. After all the unpleasantness at the Alienage, tensions are running high in some quarters."

"The laundress next door had no problem..." Bronwyn began.

Wade sighed, his eyes to Heaven. "In *exalted* quarters. Bann Vaughan is always interested in pretty elf girls."

Herren tried to hush him again. "We don't want to get involved!" he hissed in Wade's direction. He gave Bronwyn a professional smile. "You didn't hear Wade. Sometimes he speaks indistinctly. I've warned him about it."

"I didn't hear a thing."

Bronwyn and Tara strolled around the Market District, looking and listening. They bought hot pasties from one street vendor, and a red apple each from another. Some people did not seem to see Tara, or want to sell to her, but they had no problem with a tall woman warrior. Bronwyn was munching her apple when she heard a high, nasal voice she recognized immediately.

It was her cousin, Lady Habren Bryland, with maid and bodyguard in tow, torturing a silk merchant with her shrill demands. Bronwyn had not seen Habren in years, but there was absolutely no doubt it was she. Bronwyn edged closer, admiring the yellow silk in her cousin's manicured hands. Her shadow fell on the cloth, and Habren looked up, displeased.

"Get away, churl! How dare you look at me? My father can have you sent south to fight darkspawn!"

Tara said, "Come away, Jennet!" and pulled at her arm. Bronwyn looked at her cousin, her lips twisted in a sour smile. Habren's bodyguard tensed, then relaxed as Bronwyn withdrew. Scout raised a leg and gave his opinion.

Well, Bronwyn had known that Habren was in Denerim. She wondered what had come of the matchmaking council between Cousin Leonas and Arl Urien. It would be a good marriage for Habren, in a material light. For the people of Denerim, who would some day have Habren as their Arlessa? Perhaps not so much.

Gossip they overheard confirmed that the King was back in Denerim. Nobody seemed to know much about it. Loghain was still with the army, so there had been no disaster on that front. Apparently the Arl of Denerim had come with the King. When questioned, no one appeared to think the King's wounds dangerous... rather, they were just serious enough to need some convalescence away from the fighting. Now and then, she heard some sarcastic remarks, but only a few. The King was a popular figure.

She caught sight of Zevran and Sten, early on. Eventually Zevran slipped away to their meeting place, and after sunset, so did Sten. Bronwyn, still pleased with herself about her new armor, strolled a bit more, buying some food and drink for Leliana. As the sun dropped below the horizon, the merchants closed their stalls for the day. Carts wheeled out of the Market place, and Bronwyn and Tara clung inconspicuously to the edges of the buildings, moving down the little dead-end street where Marjolaine lived. Scout padded ahead, shaking off the attentions of the last of the children playing in the dirt.

They found Leliana's hiding place. She once again

described the interior of the house in detail, and told them what she had observed, while tearing hungrily into the food Bronwyn gave her.

"She has at least two Qunari guards. As I said, there is no back entrance. I remember that well from when I used to live here. A man left the house and then returned, and I'm sure he's an apostate mage — the way he holds himself tells a lot. He also has a very large walking stick." She laughed softly. "Marjolaine lives there. I'm sure of it, but she almost never goes out during the day. At night, however..."

"If she goes out," Bronwyn whispered, "We go in. If nothing happens before midnight, we'll go in anyway."

Darkness fell over the city, and the stars glittered above. The usual noises came from the surrounding houses: a man and woman quarreling, a child wailing for attention, someone throwing dirty dishwater out into the street. Farther away, there was a thread of sound from the Chantry, as the choir intoned the Chant of Light. Leliana sighed softly.

Boots crunched on the ground, turning the corner, and a cloaked figure strode into view. Behind him was a well-armed guard. Bronwyn put her hand out to still her companions' eagerness.

The cloaked figure rapped three times and then once more on Marjolaine's door.

"Message for the lady."

The door creaked open, and there was a muttered conference. The cloaked figure passed some parchment to

someone within, and Bronwyn heard him hiss, "No — he wants to see her himself!" There was more talk, and after a moment, the door opened wider, and three people emerged from the door: a cloaked woman, a heavily armed Qunari, and someone who might be...

Tara nudged her, and nodded. Yes, a mage, then... The door closed, and there was the sound of a bar sliding into place.

After the sound of their footsteps faded, Bronwyn made up her mind.

"We're going in, and we'll wait for her inside. Try to keep at least one of the guards alive."

Sten grunted acknowledgment, and Zevran chuckled softly.

"All right, let's go," Leliana murmured.

Bronwyn strode up to the door and knocked three times, and then once. "Message for the Lady."

Someone inside unbarred the door, and cracked it open, "What's going on —"

He froze in place, caught by Tara's spell. Bronwyn leaped into the room, and found herself attacked by one of the Qunari guards. Leliana flanked the man, and snarled as she drove her dagger under his armpit. Scout charged him, and knocked him down. Behind them was a thud and gurgle, and Zevran's excited laugh. Another spell hissed, and the two guards were dead.

They were in an anteroom, dimly lit by a pair of candles. It was not an unattractive place. Another door accessed the rest of the house. The walls were plastered and white-

washed. The plank floor was covered by woven rugs. There were benches for visitors, and a big wardrobe for storage. Bronwyn bit her lip. Yes. It was big enough for her purposes.

"Bar the door, and put the Qunari in the wardrobe," she ordered quietly. "And hide that other poor fellow in the big chest. Let's move this rug a bit to cover the bloodstains."

It was done. They drew a deep breath and eased the next door open.

Lightning popped at them, its sudden brightness burning dark patches in Bronwyn's vision. Tara ran out, low and quiet, and shot a freezing spell into a doorway. A pair of warriors rushed out from the opposite side and Leliana and Zevran were on them. Sten did not roar a battle cry, but was the more terrifying for his silence. He sneered at the Qunari who faced him, and knocked him backwards with a brutal slam of his sword pommel.

"*Katara, Tal'Vashoth!*" he growled, driving his blade through his opponent's neck.

A tell-tale sphere of blue light bloomed in a doorway, and Bronwyn rushed at it. She tripped, caught by a booby-trap, and fell head-long, but not before she could lash out at the mage's feet with her silverite blade. The man shrieked, ankles spurting blood. Scout was leaping past her, smashing the man back against a bench.

Tara cried out, but it sounded more like victory than distress. Bronwyn untangled herself from the tripwire, and dusted herself off.

What had been quite a nice house was now a shambles. The cozy sitting room floor was littered with bodies, and the furniture was splintered with blows and charred with spells. Blood smeared the wall by the door like a crude painting.

Zevran came out of the single bedroom, calling out, "Clear here!" On the other side, the open doorway appeared to lead to a kitchen and larder. There was a faint, smothered rustle. Scout growled and lowered his head. Bronwyn glanced at Leliana, and they moved in to check it out.

There was an alcove to the right, where the noise had come from. Bronwyn stepped out to look into it, and saw a young girl crouching in the stone laundry basin.

"Please," she whimpered. "Please don't kill me." Trembling and young, her voice was sweetened by an Orlesian accent, and her eyes were large and blue. "Please," she sobbed, nodding at Scout. "Please, I'm afraid of big dogs."

"Put your hands up," Bronwyn ordered, "and come out of there slowly."

Leliana sighed deeply, looking the girl over. "Marjolaine has a new apprentice, I think."

"No!" the girl cried. "I am only the kitchenmaid. Madame brings me from Orlais. I cook, I clean, I serve Madame! I am never allowed to go out! Please, please save me! Madame is so cruel!"

Bronwyn was relaxing, about to lower her sword, when Leliana's voice sounded in the little room, hard and unyielding. "Marjolaine is never cruel to her tools," she

contradicted, "until she is done with them —"

The sharp little dagger was spinning out of the girl's hand already, and a flask of acid was ready in the other. Bronwyn snarled as the dagger lodged in her leather helmet, and she lunged quickly, her sword extended. The flask of acid dropped and broke, the fumes rising up, sharp and acrid. Scout barked, rearing back from the stink.

"Stupid girl!" Leliana said bitterly. "Dying in a laundry tub for the likes of Marjolaine." The girl sagged to her knees, coughed, and was dead. Leliana's voice rose. "Did you think she would die for you?"

They left her there, the acid eating away at her skin. One of the mages was badly wounded, but still alive, and they took away his staff and bound his hands. Zevran knelt over him, the point of his sword as the man's throat.

And then they had a talk. Tara would heal the man, which he needed if he wanted to live, but at a price. Sten and Scout guarded the front door, waiting for the return of the mistress of the house.

"You're not from the Chantry," the captive mage guessed. He was a bearded, rangy man, who looked like he had gone for long periods without enough to eat.

"No," Bronwyn said shortly. "We're not from the Chantry. I don't care if you're an apostate. I want to know all about Marjolaine and what she's up to. Where does she keep her papers? Who is she working with? Give me something I can use, and this lady will stop you from bleeding to death."

He was only hired help, and so was perfectly happy to tell them anything that would save his life. He was not allowed into the lady's private room, but he knew her papers were there. He did not go with her to meet her clients, but he knew who some of them were. His testimony was written down, his bleeding stopped; and he was tied up and put under a sleep spell.

Leliana, of course, remembered all of Marjolaine's hiding places: even the secret drawer in her desk. Behind a bookcase were hidden files and something that Leliana called "dossiers," which contained lengthy information on every important person in Ferelden.

In easy reach were the bard's tools of forgery: model letters from individuals which were rewritten to suit her needs. Bronwyn flipped through them, and her stomach dropped at the sight of one of her father's, along with some drafts of the document that Marjolaine had transformed it into. It had taken some attempts, evidently, before she had made it something useful for her purposes. Knowing Father, it was clear to Bronwyn which was the original. It was quite bad enough. She read it through, and then read through it again with growing anguish.

"Oh, Father!" she whispered. "How could you *do* that to me?"

Two hours passed, while Bronwyn, Leliana, and Tara sorted through the papers. Bronwyn's misery had hardened into a cold, dark rage that she grasped like a sword.

She would be taking everything here, and the nobles of Ferelden would bear the consequences.

Zevran was watching at the window, and gave the quiet signal that Marjolaine was returning. The companions assembled in the anteroom to wait.

"I would like to talk to Marjolaine," Bronwyn murmured. "The others need to be eliminated instantly."

Sten unbarred and opened the door at the secret knock, his size and armor making him much like any other Qunari in the gloom. Marjolaine and her guards did not realize the substitution until they were inside, and the door closed behind them.

The woman was stunned, and her surprised bodyguards disposed of with lethal dispatch.

"Bar the door," Bronwyn said, her voice icy and inhuman even to her own ears. "We don't want any surprise callers. Bring the woman into the sitting room and we'll have a talk."

"I'll tie her up," Leliana said fiercely. "You don't know how clever she is." She slipped her hand into the woman's bodice, and withdrew a thick packet of folded and sealed parchment. Moving over to a candle, she used heat and the tip of her dagger to expertly pop open the seal without damaging it. Bronwyn took the packet, paused as she recognized the seal, and began reading the contents, her brow darkening at every sentence.

Marjolaine's hands were tied behind her back, and her thumbs were bound together — a trick Leliana had learned

from Marjolaine herself – and she was moved to one of the settees. When Bronwyn had read enough, she gave a nod. Tara revived the prisoner, and the interrogation began. Bronwyn stood in a shadowed corner, not wanting to show her hand right away.

"Ah, Leliana," Marjolaine said softly, her Orlesian accent drawling out the words. "How lovely to see you! But what have you done to yourself? Your hair – short as a boy's! And such a color! You have not been taking care of yourself, I fear."

"Is that why you sent your men after us?" Leliana asked. "To 'take care of me?' They failed, as you see."

"You understood my invitation, then. And here you are," smiled the dark-haired woman, "come back to play the Great Game. I always knew you would, after you tired of your little holiday in the Chantry. We are not so different, you and I."

Tara cried, "Leliana is nothing like you!"

"Ah, a fierce little mage! And pretty, too! Always a useful servant – unless they are like that one," she sneered at the unconscious bound mage on the floor.

Leliana stood over her, eyes searching. "We killed your guards and found your correspondence. You have been very busy, here in Ferelden. I thought you would have gone home to Orlais after the last time we met."

Marjolaine laughed darkly. "And so I would, *ma petite*, but there is always so much to do here in Denerim. I would love to leave, but not until the Game is played to the finish. I hate Ferelden, as you know: the entire country smells of wet dog.

The smell is in my hair, my clothes – bah! I cannot get it out."

Bronwyn glanced at Leliana, who understood, and ask, "And the Game itself? Or the endgame, I should say? It seems that you are playing for very high stakes. If you succeed, the Empress herself will reward you."

"Ha!" the woman shook her long dark hair, smirking. "Reward me? She might even give me one of these little dog provinces to rule! To win by marriage what her predecessors failed to win by war – now that is triumph! That is victory!" Her voice lowered to an insinuating purr. "And there will be riches enough for all. Enough even for you and your most efficient companions. If you have seen the documents I was carrying – and I must presume that you have – you know that I am on the winning side. To oppose me might even be called treason! You will never have a better opportunity, my dear. Untie my hands, and together we shall deliver this very good news to the Empress!"

Leliana paused, thinking it over. "Untie you so you can stab me in the back, you mean..."

"No, no! Not with all these swords pointing at me!" Marjolaine laughed. "If you have done so well, you deserve to be a partner in my success."

"And leave?" Leliana seemed off-balance, even hopeful. "Just leave? Go to Orlais, you mean?"

"But of course! We can leave this horrible place behind us. I have horses in the Market stables. We can take our letter and leave all else behind. Untie me, and we can be



gone together, tonight!"

Tara took her cue from Leliana, looking at the bard with wide eyes. "Would we really go with her? What about him?" she asked, pointing at the mage on the floor.

Marjolaine shrugged. "Bring him or leave him. It is all one to me. A little fire will cover our departure."

"And your correspondence?" Leliana asked. "Do we take it or leave it, too?"

"Most should be burned: but the Empress might enjoy some of the dossiers. Not all – some are no longer of use..."

Bronwyn spoke, her words dropping like icicles into the conversation. "Not the dossier of Teyrn Bryce Cousland, for instance?" She stepped out, removed her helmet, and stared down at Marjolaine. "Not the dossiers of those who are already dead by your intrigues?"

"Ah!" Marjolaine looked up at her. Her eyes changed, then, and her voice softened. "You do not look much like your description, my dear. War is a hard master, is it not? The scar does nothing for you. And such eyes... very compelling, very strange. They are new, yes?"

"Yes."

"I see. You must know, my dear, that it was nothing personal. That Arl Howe – how easy it was to make him believe what he wanted to believe. Your father was a charming man, and not unskilled, but he played the Game, and lost."

Bronwyn shivered under the stress of maintaining her calm. She took a deep breath, and hefted her dagger. "Be



sure to tell my nephew Oren," she murmured in Marjolaine's ear, "that it was only a Game."

The dagger struck home and twisted. Marjolaine's eyes widened, and she ground her teeth, too proud to scream. Her feet kicked out, reflexively, and then she flopped back. Bronwyn was frozen in place, unable to withdraw her dagger. Scout whined, and rubbed against her side.

Zevran took charge of the aftermath. "Now, *bellissima*, let us move her quickly, yes? We must make the house look like she has gone on a long journey. We do not want her to bleed on the cushions!"

Bronwyn could not move. "And by the way," she snarled furiously at Marjolaine's corpse, "Ferelden does *not* smell like wet dog!"

Scout yipped comfortingly, while Zevran and Sten pulled Bronwyn away. The assassin and the Qunari exchanged eye rolls.

There was much to do, and Zevran was experienced in the art of concealing murders. There was a cellar beneath the kitchen, and Sten was put to work digging a grave, wide and deep enough for all the bodies. It was fortunate that there was a shovel down there—or not so fortunate as ironic, when digging quickly revealed that there were already bodies under the house.

"How well our hostess has provided for us," Zevran laughed. "Shovels, quicklime to consume the bodies! One might almost say she was our accomplice!"

The blood was scrubbed away, and the furniture rearranged. Bronwyn, still numb from the night's disclosures and events, was brought a cup of herbal tea. It was then she noticed that the captive mage was awake and looking at her, terror in his eyes.

"What shall we do with this one?" Zevran asked lightly. "It is a pity you have awakened, my friend. Better to die in one's sleep, feeling no pain."

Bronwyn croaked, "Let him go."

"*Bellissima*," Zevran said reproachfully, "you know it cannot be. The man knows little, true, but he knows too much."

"Let him go!" she cried out. "Look," she said to the man, a little desperately. "if you go blabbing to any of Marjolaine's old friends, you'll just end up dead. Here... here's three sovereigns. I want you on a ship out of Ferelden tomorrow."

Zevran sighed. Leliana sat down by Bronwyn and took her hand, giving Zevran a look he understood perfectly. "It is your noble nature," she said softly. "I understand that. If that is what you really want, Bronwyn, we must take the man with us and put him on the boat ourselves to make sure of it."

"All right," Bronwyn subsided. "Let's do that."

Zevran told the mage, "I hope you appreciate this lady's generosity. Myself, I would kill you now and bury you in the cellar, but she is full of mercy, and I am her sworn man."

"What is that you have?" Bronwyn asked Tara, whose hands were full of something sparkling.

"Marjolaine's jewelry," Tara told her at once. "It would be

silly to bury her with it."

Bronwyn took an angry breath, but Leliana cut in. "That is very sensible. Her jewelry is worth a lot of money. In fact, we should go through the house carefully. We should take everything of value, and what we cannot take we should bury with the bodies, to make it look like she packed up and left."

It was logical, and perfectly disgusting. Bronwyn pulled herself together and gathered all the papers she could find. They went into a backpack she found in a cupboard. Meanwhile, Leliana and Tara packed some of the best clothes, and a few of the best weapons. Leliana lingered over Marjolaine's beautiful vanity set: brush, comb, hand mirror, and jewelry box of silver and ivory, and then packed them too.

The bodies and the unwanted equipment were consigned to the deep hole in the cellar. The nameless young girl fell backwards like a crushed flower, Marjolaine was thrown in next and her arms spread wide, one covering the girl's face. When all the bodies were in the grave, Leliana murmured a prayer:

"I shall not be left to wander the drifting roads of the Fade, For there is no darkness, nor death either, in the Maker's Light, And nothing that He has wrought shall be lost."

Zevran poured the bag of quicklime over all, and he and Sten quickly shoveled the earth back and tamped it down. The companions went back upstairs without speaking.

Murder, Bronwyn thought wearily. *That was murder, not war. I am a murderer, and I must live with it.* Scout sniffed at



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her, puzzled at her strange smell, and whined.

Leliana broke the silence. "Let us all wash ourselves carefully, and no one will guess what we have been up to."

She took her own advice, and after she was clean, she went into the bedchamber, looked at herself in the mirror briefly, and began changing into Marjolaine's richest silk gown. Bronwyn, wiping off her armor in the sitting room, listened to the bard's calm voice, soothing as a lullaby.

"I found the key to the front door. We shall lock the house, yes? If Marjolaine is expected to be delivering a letter in person, then no one will be coming here for at least a month. Even then, they might think she has had some misadventure, or has changed her mind. Now come, what's done cannot be undone, and we shall all sleep late tomorrow."



Edwina, the sleepy and irritated owner of the Gnawed Noble Tavern was awakened by knocking, and roused herself to let the foreign lady and her retinue back in. The lady was very pretty, very drunk, and very happy. Some sort of wild party, Edwina supposed. The guards were silent, and the servants half carried the lady back to her rooms.

Another typical night in Denerim, Edwina sighed to herself. She blew out the candle and slipped back into bed.



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CHAPTER 2



DARK WATERS

ATER LAPPED GENTLY AT THE BEACHED ROWBOAT. Two ravens perched on the bow, sooty feathers gleaming with health.

A brief dispute, and one of the birds pecked at the other, who fluttered up with a squawk. Anders flapped unsteadily back to the grassy shore, and transformed. "Ouch!" he complained. Morrigan followed, and resumed her human form in the blink of an eye.

"You must *practice*, Anders, if you wish to master this form. That means, if you do not comprehend it, that you must *fly*, and fly frequently, whether you find it odd or not!"

"I *am* practicing, and I *was* going to fly," he insisted. "I'm just not ready to fly that far!"

He pointed to the Circle Tower, clear and imposing in the morning sun. He added, "And I never thought I would voluntarily go there ever again!"

Morrigan stroked his hair with a light touch. He really was perfect in every way for her purposes, and not an unworthy companion. "We must go, and we must go soon."



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In three days, 'twill will be too late. I may never have such a chance again!" She leaned in, breath warm and urgent on Anders' throat. "And what a rare jest – to plunder the Tower for treasures they do not even know they possess!"

Anders' face yielded a smile at last. "There is that," he laughed. "I'd risk a lot to put one over on that bastard Irving! I still think his study is the most likely place to find your book."

"You know the Tower, and I do not," Morrigan agreed, pleased that he was once more in a good humor. "We shall fly there, fly back, and none the wiser!"

Her mother had always kept her many secrets close. Yet there was that one time they had slipped her leash: after a long journey gathering herbs, they had returned to find Templars rifling the hut. A quick and ugly battle had dispatched the intruders, but Mother's wrath was boundless when she discovered that two Templars had already escaped through the marshes, bearing away ancient tomes, and, by chance, her personal grimoire. Rarely had her enemies so vexed her, and Flemeth had taken her revenge on the bodies of the Templars left behind. They had provided her with rare ingredients for some time, and what she had no use for had hung from nearby branches until the marsh birds had their fill. The rest was slowly absorbed by the looming sylvan trees themselves: bones, sinew, and all.

Where else would the Templars have taken books of magic, than back to the Tower where magic itself was imprisoned? The fools who dwelt therein might embrace



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the chains that bound them, but Morrigan knew better. To his credit, Anders felt likewise, and had agreed to help her search for the lost item. The Black Grimoire, the object of her search, would tell her those things that Flemeth had not wished to share.

Anders' price was not high: a tumble or two on the soft moss of the forest, a kind word now and then, a smile. He was a comely man, and a gentle lover. He was educated and magically powerful, even by Morrigan's standards. He was refreshingly clean in his personal habits. He was, in fact, far and away superior to the rough-handed Chasinds Mother had lured in to initiate Morrigan in the ways of men and women, or the clumsy peasants Morrigan herself had chanced upon from time to time. His company was... agreeable... to her.

She remembered to grant him a smile then, the better to have her way.

"Let us fly now, to the bluff and back again... thrice. If you do well," she purred, "you shall be rewarded as you like!"



If this was command, Alistair decided, it wasn't so bad. At the moment, he really didn't have to do much of anything. He was lonely, though. He missed Bronwyn even more than he had expected. She was the alpha of their pack, he decided, chuckling over the image: the leader who defined them all and their relationships to one another. And she was very nice to look at.



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They were staying at the Spoiled Princess for the next two days. At that point, they would have to move out and wait at the meeting place Bronwyn had so carefully marked on his map. Until then, they could take turns caring for the horses, practicing their marksmanship, trading, sparring a bit, or resting. It was a nice place: the innkeeper was a friendly sort, and the barmaids seemed to think that Grey Wardens were genuine heroes. The ale was good, too.

Bronwyn had suggested that he plan out a schedule, and Alistair had actually sat down at a table in the common room and written one out. He went outside, where Cullen was exercising his horse, and went over it. Cullen thought it was all right.

"I like it that you've put the dwarves on horse duty with an experienced partner," he said. "They need to get used to them, but we don't want any accidents or injuries."

Alistair snorted. "I wouldn't call Anders or Morrigan exactly *experienced* with horses."

Cullen laughed. "Well, they don't confuse them with brontos! Speaking of the mages, where are they?"

"I don't think I really want to know. Anders has been smirking more than usual lately."

The horse was reined in. Cullen dismounted, frowning. "Anders had something of a reputation in the Tower. Bronwyn won't like it if he breaks that witch's heart."

"It's more likely to be the other way around."

"I don't think she'd like that either. I have to tell you,"



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Cullen said frankly, lowering his voice a little, "that I don't approve of those mages cavorting off by themselves. It's not decent. I don't want people to get the idea that Grey Wardens are... are... libertines, or something of that sort!"

Just at that moment, Brosca leaned out of an upstairs window, and called, "Cullen! I'm having trouble fastening my belt. Come upstairs and help me!"

Alistair's brows rose.

Cullen blushed, "She doesn't mean anything by it! She's a nice girl, and not some kind of temptress like that Morrigan. She's just being friendly."

"She likes you a lot," Alistair remarked, completely deadpan. "Don't worry about the horse. I'll lead it back."

Astrid emerged from the inn, just as Cullen was entering, and she granted him a grave nod as they passed. She saw Alistair walking out the horse, and strode over to him.

"Oghren said that you were making out a rota of our duties. May I see it?"

Surprised, Alistair handed it over to her at once.

The dwarf woman studied it frowning, and then nodded. "I might suggest more archery practice, but this is quite acceptable. The horses require no more care for the moment?"

"No." Alistair grinned. "Cullen's very diligent with them. The point of the schedule is to make sure he doesn't have to do *all* the work with them!"

"Fair enough. We are an order of equals, I understand. It

is proper that we share all the duties. I see that you have nothing planned at the moment. Would you care to spar?"

Alistair hesitated. It was a struggle to get used to the idea of sparring with dwarves – especially dwarf women. It seemed too much like attacking children. Astrid was still looking up at him coolly, brows raised. She was not a child, of course, and would be offended if she knew he thought of her as one. The keen blue eyes were not a child's, and no child's mouth had ever been marked with those faint lines of humor and irony.

"Sure," he said, aware he was staring. He had never realized that dwarf women could actually be... good-looking. "That would be great."

They sparred, and within five minutes she handed him his helmet, so to speak.

Alistair gasped, on his back, winded. His entire shield arm tingled from the force of Astrid's last blow. She stood over him, head cocked to one side.

"You were going easy on me," she remarked. "Don't."

"Sorry."

"Am I a Grey Warden, or not?" she asked.

He sat up, wincing. "You're a Grey Warden."

"Good. Because either I'm a Grey Warden, or I'm nothing; and I don't care to be nothing."

She put out a hand to help him up. Alistair was astonished at the strength of her grip. He shouldn't have been, of course. Wasn't that what people called the dwarves?

"*The Stout Folk?*" Astrid was stouter than most, he guessed.

"What are you doing?"

Brosca and Cullen came out of the inn, tankards in hand. Alistair dusted himself off, grinning wryly. "Trying to spar." "Nuh-huh!" Brosca laughed, shaking her head. "You were trying, Alistair: Astrid was *succeeding*."

"Well..." he dug the toe of his boot into the dust, embarrassed. "Let's go another round."

They took turns. Each of them had his or her own tricks. Some time later Oghren came out and joined in the practice. There were special tactics needed to deal with an axe man like the red-haired dwarf. Astrid knew quite a few, but Oghren knocked her flying more than once. Then Brosca took on Oghren, and showed what a pair of really fast practice daggers could do to take down a stronger opponent when he was still winding up for a crushing blow.

"Or *would* be crushing, if he could land it!" Brosca laughed triumphantly.

"That was a good practice," Astrid admitted. "A decent workout. Perhaps the dreams will not be so bad tonight."

"Don't count on it," Alistair warned her, following her back into the cozy inn.

She actually laughed a little.

The mages did not return until the first stars came out.

A night, a day, a night. Two ravens followed the moonlight to the dark tower in the middle of Lake Calenhad.



Their arranged destination was a window ledge on the second floor. The first raven backwinged down; the second landed awkwardly, talons scrabbling on stone. The two ravens used their beaks to tug at the stiff, narrow window. After a moment, the hinges yielded, and the window creaked open. A small aperture: one that no human, elf, or dwarf could hope to enter. For the ravens, however, it was more than sufficient. Their dark plumage concealed them as they flapped down through the darkened chamber to the stone floor, fifteen feet below.

In a moment, a man and a woman stood there, eyes adjusting to the dim light from the hall beyond. The chamber had no door. Anders had led Morrigan to his old digs in the Senior Mage Quarters. The Templars allowed the mages no real privacy. There were partitions only, and Templars could peer at the sleeping mages as their duty – or fancy – took them: as they washed or dressed or relieved themselves. Mages must not be allowed any privacy, lest they go mad, ally with demons, become abominations, and destroy all life on Thedas before breakfast. The tiny windows let in minimal air and light, but were not a practicable exit – unless one could shape-shift, which the Chantry had decreed was a very improper magical discipline indeed.

It was long after midnight. Only the Templars on guard would be awake, and that not for long, when Anders cast *Somnium* on them.

The two of them peered around the edge of the wall at the



figure in massive armor, leaning a little against the wall.

"Carroll," Anders whispered softly to Morrigan. "A complete moron, and generally lyrium-addled. No one will be surprised if *he's* asleep."

Morrigan chuckled, and the spell was launched: perhaps not as powerful as it would have been had Anders had his staff to focus it, but strong enough. The gawky Templar's knees buckled, and he slid down the wall slowly, with a series of quiet *clanks*.

"Now for the First Enchanter's study. The door will probably be open. There's a Templar on duty at that end of the hall, too."

Morrigan looked about, yellow eyes taking it all in. These endless, circular halls, this maze of bookshelves and stonework might have been her home, in another life. Her home, or rather, her cage. Not even to have the right to a door! It did not surprise her that Anders had tried to escape.

They glided along the arc of the corridor, watching and listening. Anders gave Morrigan a nudge as they neared the First Enchanter's study. He looked beyond, to where the stairs led up to the next floor, recognized the Templar on duty, and a scowl darkened his face.

"That bastard," he hissed. "I'll never forget *him*."

Morrigan caught at his arm and quickly shook her head. Anders snarled soundlessly, but cast sleep over the man. They crossed the hall and tried the door. It was unlocked, of course, for even the First Enchanter could not be permitted a lock on his door.

They eased the door shut behind them, and Morrigan raised a light. Not wanting to seem a bumpkin from the Wilds, she refused to show her admiration for the wide and lofty room, for the fine, carved desk, for the beautiful windows of colored glass and the fascinating trinkets. Instead, she joined Anders as he opened chests and rifled the bookcases. She had described the Black Grimoire carefully to Anders, and they could not miss it, once they laid eyes upon it.

A rustle among the parchment, and a mouse darted across the floor. Morrigan, fresh from her bird form, momentarily saw it as prey, and then noticed Anders' knowing grin. She huffed, and went on with their search.

There was only so much she could carry in her robes, and still successfully transform. They had devised a plan to carry the book, but there were other things in the study that caught their interest. Anders found some notes that he thrust into a pocket, and a thin volume joined them shortly thereafter.

Morrigan moved to a large chest in a corner, opening it, and quickly sorting through the jumble within. Parchments, letters... a parcel wrapped in more parchment... more letters.

She paused, and dug through to the parcel again. It was book-sized, and yes – it was indeed a book. Carefully, she pulled the parchment away from a corner, and thrilled with triumph to see the black-dyed leather cover. Flemeth had once claimed that her grimoire was bound in brain-cured human skin, but Morrigan suspected that that was one of her mother's tall tales. This leather looked and felt

like oxhide to her. She distracted Anders from his own search, and tapped her finger on the book. He hurried over, smiling broadly.

"Put everything else away just as it was!" he whispered. "Irving may never know it was gone. The library –"

"Anders, we have no time!" She soothed him with a light touch. "The day may come when, as a Grey Warden, you can simply walk into the Tower and demand to use the library. We will never have another chance to loot the First Enchanter's study!"

Clutching her precious grimoire, she urged him to the door. She dimmed her witchlight, and the room fell into darkness once more. The door was carefully opened, and they were relieved to see that the nearby Templar was still sleeping. Anders sneered, but readied himself to creep out, and find the window they had entered through.

Then the door to the next floor opened, and their plans were changed for them.

"What is – *Kendrick!* Wake up, man!"

Anders clutched at Morrigan's arm. "Knight-Commander Greagoir!" he whispered, his blood turning to ice. Grey Warden or not, it would be fatal to be found poking about the First Enchanter's study after midnight. The door was shut, and the two of them backed away hastily, stumbling in the dark.

The Knight-Commander's angry rebuke lasted for some time. Then they heard heavy, metal shod footsteps stalk down the hall. A pause. The door opened.



Greagoir held a light crystal up and glanced about the room. Behind him stood a sheepish Templar. The two Templars saw only vague shadows, and nothing resembling mages. It would have taken a closer examination to reveal the two ravens hiding behind the chest in the corner.

"We will do the inspection *together*," Greagoir was staying, "since you seem to have found your duties too great a burden tonight."

"Sorry, Knight-Commander," mumbled the Templar. "Won't happen again."

"It had better not!"

To Anders' horror, they left the door open when they moved away.

Morrigan stepped out into the shaft of light from the doorway and she murmured, "We can still do this."

They could open the small window – very gingerly – with the hooked pole kept for the purpose. Furniture had to be moved, quietly and carefully, but they could do that, too. Anders pulled out the square of fine silk and the long light cord they had brought, and Morrigan shifted again – to her preferred shape of a hawk – a hawk big and strong enough to snatch up a rabbit. The hawk settled on the window frame, and Anders wrapped the grimoire in the silk and bound it to the hawk's legs, grimacing.

"I still don't like this," he told Morrigan. "It's dangerous for you."

The hawk pecked at him in exasperation. Anders finished the last knot, and stood back. "Good luck..."



Morrigan dove from the window into the chilly moonlight. There was a moment of terror as the book dropped the length of the cord and a leaden weight tugged at her.

She opened her wings, and the first downstroke was agony. All she had to do was make it to the broken end of the causeway...

Anders jumped down silently from the desk, and moved it back where it had been, rearranging the papers on it. If something were out of order, the First Enchanter would think it was the Templars, spying again. He took a breath, and transformed into a raven again, flapping up to the window ledge, and glancing with keen birdsight to see the hawk laboring with its burden.

Darting out, far more swiftly, Anders flew past with a "caw" of encouragement. The hawk was finding it hard going, but there was no help for it now. The lake glittered beneath them, silver on black; the broken end of the causeway was marble-white. He flew faster, wanting to be ready when Morrigan arrived. She was coming, a growing silhouette against the moon.

A rush of dark feathers, the bump of an unbearable weight. Anders hissed as a talon caught his hand, drawing blood. He tore at the thin rope, and the knots came free. Between one breath and another, Morrigan lay stretched out on the cracked stones of the causeway, trembling with exhaustion.

He fetched his staff and cast a general rejuvenation spell, and then used his fingertips and a word to heal his own hand.

"I hope this bloody book is worth all that. I thought for a moment you might not make it," he told her, sweeping her up in his arms.

She did not push him away. "I am not so feeble in will as to let a mere book kill me, even though 'tis Flemeth's!"

Cold rain sheeted down, making the encampment at Ostagar even more inhospitable than usual. Smoke rose from damp fires in a white cloud, reducing visibility from the lookout posts.

Loghain, walking along the pickets, heard the challenge and the response. Reports from Gherlen's Halt? It was not Roarke's usual time. He must have something notable to say. He sent a man to fetch the courier, while he continued inspecting the improved defenses Voldrik had devised here on the north approach.

There were two young men, this time, worn out with hard riding.

"We made good time enough, my lord," one explained. "Arl Teagan gave us remounts when we went through Redcliffe."

"Did he?" Loghain considered it. "Sensible of him. I'll want to hear about Redcliffe later. Let's see what Roark has to say..."

Emboldened by his excitement, the other boy burst out, "It's not just the Commander, my lord! The Girl Warden was at Gherlen's Halt and she sent letters for you, and her brother the Teyrn, and his Majesty!" He saw the panicked look on his friend's face, and lowered his voice. "I reckon

it's good news, my lord," he mumbled, chastened.

"Indeed? Then let us have it..."

He would question the lads later. Right now, he wanted to read the letters in the privacy of his quarters at the Tower of Ishal. The heavy leather bag was deposited on his camp desk, and the riders sent off for rest and a meal.

"Stay, Cauthrien. The rest of you are dismissed."

They were too disciplined to show the disappointment they must be feeling. If the news was good, he would tell them himself, and in his own way.

There was thick parcel of parchment, directed to Fergus Cousland, and sealed with the Grey Warden griffon. There was a letter to Cailan – a thin folded parchment. And for Loghain himself...

"My lord Teyrn –

Bhelen is King in Orzammar, and the dwarven army is on the march."

He felt his lips curl upward. The smile could be indulged, for this was the best news he had had in weeks.

No. Months. Maybe longer.

He told Cauthrien, "It appears that Bronwyn has been successful in her appeal to the dwarves. They are coming."

He read the letter through, and hesitated over the references to their "neighbors." She must mean the Orlesians, and that was ominous.

He gave the letter to Cauthrien to study, while he pored over the nice little map Bronwyn had drawn for him. It was

a useful thing, to know where the Deep Roads lay under the soil of Ferelden. Bronwyn had marked them in red ink, and then shown where the old entrances were situated. It was not complete, of course. Perhaps someday he could persuade her to give him a complete map of the Deep Roads, or at least one that showed where they wound underneath Orlais. Of course, an underground march would not be feasible, but it would be amusing to see if it was even *possible*.

Meanwhile, his second remarked, "Based on this, she will be here with the dwarves in less than two weeks. Hardly an outcome that anyone expected."

Loghain snorted. "You mean it was unexpected by our King, with all his defeatist talk! I am *not* so surprised." He gave Cauthrien a grim smile. "I shall see to it that His Majesty gets the news just as fast as our couriers can reach Denerim! Perhaps he will be moved to rejoin us, in order to share in what he must describe as a 'glorious moment.'"

Cauthrien considered and said frankly. "It is rather a 'glorious moment.' The dwarves last came to Ferelden's aid in the days of the Rebellion."

Loghain tried to resist the moment of nostalgia, but it swept over him nonetheless: sweet, painful, intoxicating...

"The Legion of the Dead. That name certainly brings back memories. Superb fighters, too. She's done well." He studied the Fergus' thick packet, and said, "So, Cauthrien, It seems that we'll have to reorganize the camp to accommodate our stout new allies."

After she had gone, he had decisions to make. Cousland was already in Denerim, and possibly in parts north. Loghain would have to forward this parcel to him tomorrow, but there must be untold amounts of intelligence within. No doubt both brother and sister would be furious if they knew what he intended, but he needed to know just how far the Cousland family was in with the Orlesians...

Over the years, he had learned skills that would have been useful in his younger days. It took time to remove the seal from the tangled string, but he had also learned patience. The lump of griffon-impressed wax was carefully set aside, and the string unbound. The heavy parchment was folded back, and the lengthy correspondence inside exposed. A note lay on top, and Loghain felt not even a moment's shame at reading it.

Eight Grey Wardens? That was impressive. Eight in such a short time. After twenty years, Duncan had commanded only two dozen. Bronwyn had been very busy.

So she had been in the Deep Roads. He did not envy her. He had spent time enough and to spare there himself. For some reason the dwarves had let her choose their king for them. That sounded so incredibly unlikely that it must be true. He liked the idea that she had chosen the king based on his value as a Fereldan ally. This was all very satisfactory, so far.

As to seeing the Archdemon... She had no doubt seen *something*...

Ah, yes, their little private code. Very sensible of them.

How convenient it was to be Commander of the Armies and above suspicion: so much so that when Fergus Cousland was away from his quarters, Loghain could walk past the guard, tell the man that he would wait for Teyrn Fergus inside, and then go through his private papers and make a copy of the cipher. How convenient not to have been born a nobleman, and thus not to be repressed by one's own chivalry. Loghain was proud to say that he had not chivalric bone in his body.

He found the cipher and began decoding the mysterious paragraphs. In a few moments, he laughed aloud.

"..You are not to tell the following to anyone but Teyrn Loghain..."

Well. There was as pretty an invitation to read her correspondence as a man could ask for. He went back to work, quickly decoding the rest, and then sat back, scowling in alarm.

Bronwyn had been incredibly reckless to cross the border and put herself in du Guesclin's hands. Loghain had known the father – who had been killed at the Battle of River Dane – and a pompous, preening swine he had been.

"For obvious reasons, I left Alistair behind..."

Loghain paused, wondering which reasons had been uppermost in her mind. He returned to his reading. So the Orlesian Warden had lured her to the border? This all sounded very suspicious.

"...secretly over the border to warn us not to return to the Rock, for plans were afoot to abduct us and take us into Orlais, in order to force King Cailan to admit the Orlesians..."

Loghain sat up straight, eyes blazing. "Fool of a girl! Do you imagine that is the only use the Orlesians would have made of you?"

A son of the late king. A daughter of the deceased heir-presumptive. The latter was as dangerous as the former, for Fereldan inheritance laws being as fluid as they were, Bronwyn's claim to the throne was as good as her brother's – and as good as an unacknowledged bastard's. If Cailan died in battle, the two young Wardens would have made a pretty pair of puppet monarchs to dangle on Celene's strings. At least this note supported his own theory – and Howe's – that Bronwyn knew nothing of her family's treason. Or alleged treason, if Howe was lying.

This Riordan fellow had intervened for reasons of his own. It was touchingly naïve of Bronwyn to put it down to some sort of attachment to the land of his birth. Though very capable, she was young, after all. At any rate, the fellow *had* intervened and Ferelden still had its Wardens, and Cailan would have no excuse to go crawling to that bitch Celene.

"...and know now what Wardens must do to defeat the Archdemon. Only Wardens can, they always said, and now I know why. It is a dark thing, but it will save us all..."

Loghain blew out a long, long breath. Blood magic, probably. The room turned chilly, despite the good fire in the brazier. He had always suspected that the Wardens had some sort of dealings with Blood Magic. Why be so very secretive, after all? Why did so many of their recruits disappear? What

power could they wield that was great enough to slay Gods?

Did the Chantry know? Or did they suspect? Or had the Wardens made an arrangement with them, long ago: an exception to the ban on Blood Magic, because the Wardens had confided their secrets to the Divine.

It made sense. He grimaced, regretting that the girl had gotten mixed up with anything so foul. Not her fault, of course, but very unfortunate.

Yes, the cunning Orlesians in the Chantry at Val Royeaux *must* know. They had no doubt passed it down, from Divine to Divine, since the days of Kordillius Drakon. The Chantry did not interfere with the Wardens – much – and Loghain suspected that it was because they were busy holding their noses so very *hard*.

So Bronwyn believed that this secret Warden power would work, did she? It hadn't done much for Duncan. Did it only work on the Archdemon itself? If that was the case, putting the Wardens in the vanguard had been a foolish waste.

No more secrets. When the girl rode in with her dwarven friends, she and Loghain would have a very private talk, and she *would* tell him *everything*.

The captive mage's name was Betancourt. He had been trained in the Orlesian Circle, and then assigned to serve Marjolaine in Denerim a year ago. Zevran questioned him when they awakened, gritty-eyed and exhausted, the morning after the events at Marjolaine's house. He had been tied

up and put under another sleep spell, and now he was frightened and thirsty and in desperate need of a chamberpot. Zevran saw to his comfort and allowed him a hearty breakfast. Sten watched him unblinkingly, sword drawn.

The women stumbled out of the inner bedchamber a little later, first Tara, then Leliana, and then Bronwyn, who looked quite awful. Dark smudges purpled the skin under her eyes: she was haggard and irritable. Leliana encouraged her to have a bowl of the inn's good porridge, which was enriched with apples and honey and a touch of nutmeg. Then there was a good strong cup of honeygrass tea, and then Leliana insisted on giving Bronwyn's hair a good brushing.

While she brushed, she told Bronwyn her plan. "You said you must go fetch your armor. While you are there, Zevran and I will take the mage to the docks and put him on a ship. We cannot leave until tomorrow, so why don't we see a bit of the town... do some shopping... have some fun? I thought I would grieve over Marjolaine, but I feel as if a heavy weight has been lifted from me."

With more prodding, Betancourt could tell them quite a bit about Marjolaine's operations: even things he did not know that he knew. They learned the procedure for delivering messages to the Palace, and he told them that messages to various nobles went through the barkeep right here at the Gnawed Noble, who was paid a regular fee for the service. Bronwyn nodded, and filed the information away for future use.

"We have to pick up the laundry this afternoon," Tara

reminded her. "I want to go to that Wonders of Thedas place... and maybe see the Alienage... if there's time," she added.

"Come with me to Master Wade's," Bronwyn said gruffly. "After I get my new armor, we can go to the Alienage. I don't think you'll like it, but you can see it."

"What are you going to do, Sten?" Tara asked.

"I shall guard the mage as well," Sten answered instantly. "We cannot be too careful."

Leliana and Zevran caught each other's eye, and then shrugged.

"All right then," Bronwyn considered, her voice still a little gravelly. "We'll run our errands this morning. Let's meet back here for the noon meal, and then we shall go to the Wonders of Thedas and perhaps some other shops. I also wanted to call on Brother Genetivi, and see if he's come home from that quest of his yet. Someone at the Cathedral should be able to direct me to his house."

"Do you think he might have already returned?" Leliana wondered.

Bronwyn shrugged. "If he survived at all, possibly. That village he was going to was only on the other side of Lake Calenhad, and a day's travel into the hills. I wonder if he actually heard anything about the Urn of the Sacred Ashes."

She asked the frightened Betancourt, "Do you still have your three sovereigns? Good. I don't care where you go, as long as it's not Ferelden. Good luck to you, and I hope you find better friends at the end of your journey."

"Thank you! thank you! Maker bless you for your mercy!" the man replied, head bowed. Bronwyn nodded to him, and left with Tara and Scout.

The Gnawed Noble itself was sleepy in the early morning. A few chambermaids were at work, silent and efficient, mopping floors and sweeping carpets, polishing the long, shining bar before the rest of the inn was up and doing. Outside, it was a fair and sunny day. Bronwyn inhaled the usual smells of Denerim: fresh bread and rotting garbage; oiled metal and stale urine. She bit back a wry smile, acknowledging that there was more than a hint of dog in the air, but perhaps that was just the proximity of Scout.

They strolled through the market, watching the endless parade of people, listening to the merchants crying their wares. It was, luckily, not too early to be admitted to Master Wade's workshop. Wade himself was not out of bed, but Herren gave her the armor, took her old suit in trade, and spoke with professional civility. Bronwyn felt better, simply for being in decent armor. After last night, she never wanted to see her old chainmail again. She paid for the repairs and for the new gauntlets, fended off another attempt to sell her a better helmet, and left.

"You look very impressive," Tara told her. "So that is dragonbone. What a strange color. I think your other helmet will look nice with this. Could we go to the Alienage now?"

"We could."

They could not. They arrived at the Alienage gates to find

that they were locked. The bored guard on duty informed him that at Bann Vaughan's command, the Alienage was closed. No one could go in, and no one could leave without his express permission.

"Them knife-ears have been causing trouble for months," the man told Bronwyn. He eyed Tara as he would a mangy stray cat. "Move along, now! There's nothing to see here."

"Sorry," Bronwyn said to the disappointed Tara, as they walked away.

"Why would they lock them in like prisoners?" the elf protested. "That sounds as bad as the Circle! Who does this Bann Vaughan think he is, anyway?"

"He is the son and heir of the Arl of Denerim," Bronwyn explained. "The Arl rules the city, and since Arl Urien was in Ostagar with the King, he deputized his authority to his son. Vaughan is a rather unpleasant man."

"*Evidently!*" Tara bit out, and then stalked along beside her, sulking. Scout whined at her consolingly

They went next to the Cathedral, Tara shrinking fearfully from the big Templars at either side of the open door. Bronwyn felt like a boor, wearing her helmet inside the sacred precinct, and slipped it off, taking care to remain in the shadows, as far as possible. The light from the stained glass windows was fairly dim, and glancing about, Bronwyn saw no one she knew, and no one likely to know her in return.

"Behave yourself, Scout!" she whispered. "We have to put on our best manners here!" The dog whuffed a dismissal,

unimpressed by his surroundings.

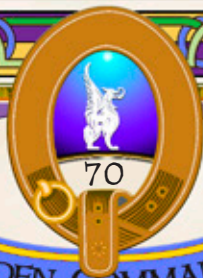
Bronwyn spoke to the priest on duty, mentioning that she had met Brother Genetivi on her recent travels, and was concerned that he had returned home safely. The woman raised an inquisitive brow, and told Bronwyn to wait. She moved off to a side chapel, and spoke to another priest. Bronwyn scowled as she distinctly heard the word "crackpot."

After a moment, the other priest came forward, smiling pleasantly: a nice-looking woman in her late thirties with coils of fair hair.

"I am Sister Justine. You know Brother Genetivi?"

"We met out by Lake Calenhad some months ago. He told me he was looking for the Urn of Sacred Ashes. He seemed a very decent fellow. I told him that this was perhaps not the best time to be traveling. I wanted to see if he made it safely home."

"He's a brilliant man," Sister Justine told Bronwyn, her voice very low, "but he isn't... well... *politically-minded*, if you understand me. Sometimes he writes things because the evidence supports them, and they're quite contrary to established doctrine. I agreed with him that the Urn of Sacred Ashes was certainly real, but I found it hard to believe that it could still exist after all these ages. He found a reference to an obscure village and was convinced he would find a clue there. I have not heard from him since, but sometimes he gets so involved in a project..." She bit her lip, and said, "He lives opposite the Gnawed Noble, in the downstairs flat. I couldn't go there alone, you under-



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stand. If he's home, do tell him to pop 'round to see me?"

"I shall." Bronwyn turned to go, and Tara was away, eager to be out of the Chantry, when the Sister's voice stopped them.

"Wait! I don't know your name!"

Bronwyn gave her a polite nod, and said, "No, you don't."

They walked on, and stepped out into the sunlight. Tara took a deep breath, and then saw the Templars. She hurried away, and Bronwyn laughed, lengthening her own strides to catch up. Scout bounded along with a happy yip. The Templars admired him, not even noticing the women the dog accompanied.

Bronwyn said, "We'll go to the house. We can knock, at least."

Tara nodded, and then glanced back discreetly, to make sure the Templars were out of sight. "I was so scared. I was scared that I would do magic accidentally and then they'd catch me."

"You're a Grey Warden," Bronwyn assured her. "I would have had to identify myself, and that would have been inconvenient, but not disastrous. You're fine. The Templars only have power over you if you give it to them."

Tara shrugged, feeling a little skeptical. She was still an elf, and still a mage, and if she were alone and tried to tell a Templar that she was really a Grey Warden, she wondered what would happen. Probably nothing she would like.

They found Brother Genetivi's lodgings without trouble, and knocked. And knocked again. Scout snuffled, and then growled.

"What's wrong?" Bronwyn asked. "Is there..." She leaned



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closer to the door, and her nose wrinkled at the smell. "That's not good," she muttered. She pounded the door, and gave it a kick. To her surprise, the door cracked open, and a young man peered out at her.

"Is Brother Genetivi at home?" Bronwyn demanded. The stink washed out over her, sickly-sweet and all too familiar. The young man was shuffling and ill at ease.

"He's not here. Brother Genetivi went west to do some research. Shall I tell him you called...? What are you doing?" he squeaked, at Bronwyn shoved hard at the door, forcing him back. Scout leaped in, teeth bared. Tara came last, and at a gesture from Bronwyn, closed the door behind them.

"Who's dead here?" Bronwyn demanded, tall and terrible.

They got very little information out of the young man. At first he denied everything, and claimed to be Genetivi's secretary Weylon. Scout raced across the long room and scabbled at a door. At that point, the farce was over, and the stranger attempted to curse them. Tara brought him down, and he was killed in the scuffle. Bronwyn opened the door that Scout had growled at, and found the remains of another young man under a blanket. He had been dead at least a week. They searched the body of their assailant, and found only the front door key and some copper coins. The other young man was too decayed for either Bronwyn or Tara to stomach putting their hands inside his clothing.

Given their situation, it was quite impossible to simply call the City Guard to their assistance. Nor was there a

convenient cellar where they could store the bodies. Their assailant was put in a wardrobe, and the rotting corpse was eased into an emptied trunk. The jumble of items cleared from said trunk included some of Brother Genetivi's notes, which Bronwyn appropriated. Around the house were some curious volumes: books on Dragon Cults, histories of Andraste and the fate of her remains.

"That... fellow... was looking for something," Tara said. "Maybe Brother Genetivi ran into trouble out west."

"I think that's more than likely," Bronwyn agreed. "Let's find anything pertinent to his travels. We can store it in the Warden's cache, and if he ever returns, we'll give it back to him then."

Not long after, they locked the front door behind them and strolled casually away, down the street toward the warehouse.

The walk to the docks was a silent one. Leliana confidently took the lead. Betancourt, the bindings on his hands discreetly hidden by his long sleeves, followed. Zevran walked at his side, a companionable arm on his back, and a ready dagger out of sight. Sten was last, and if the mage attempted either fight or flight, the Qunari appeared quite capable of tearing the man in two.

Zevran suggested the north end of the dockyards, telling them of a ship he knew: *The Siren's Call*. The owner and captain, a Rivaini named Isabela, was a friend of his, and Zevran foresaw no difficulty in obtaining passage for Betancourt. Isa-

bela might even have a use for a mage among her crew.

They talked quietly, of inconsequential things. Leliana hoped the good weather would hold for their journey south. Sten scoffed at the possibility, and predicted disaster on their way. Zevran hoped that a street vendor by the docks still made that fish stew he liked.

What they all agreed on, was their own homelands' infinite superiority to chilly, misty, inhospitable Ferelden. And even Betancourt agreed that the entire country did, indeed, smell like wet dog.

"Of course, there are far worse smells," Leliana pointed out. "And Scout is such a brave and clever dog. Bronwyn is very fond of him, and naturally she does not mind his smell — in fact she probably likes it because it is associated with her canine friend."

"The dog smell is bearable," Sten allowed, "for the beast is a true warrior, and worthy of respect. The smell of rotting garbage, however, is inexcusable. The Fereldan people have not yet grasped the concepts of proper drainage and sewage treatment."

This was so, they all agreed.

"And the city could also be much improved with some public gardens," Zevran remarked. "Statuary, other than the usual votive images of Andraste, would be attractive. Some planters with greenery and a few flowers would cover the odors."

"An excellent idea," said Sten. "It has been proven that the presence of green plants purifies the air. Thus, public gardens are not merely ornamental: among the Qunari



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we recognize their functionality.”

“Well, I like them because they are pretty,” Leliana declared. “Oh, there is the sea! How sharp the east wind is!”

They moved along a narrow alley, twisting through a maze of warehouses and tradesmen’s shops: sailmakers, netmakers, caulkers, ironmongers. The smell of rotting garbage and wet dog gave way to salt air and tar. Around the corner was a deserted pier.

“Is this the place you meant, Zevran?” Leliana asked.

“Yes. This will do, I think. The current is right here,” answered the elf. Like a striking snake, he stabbed up into the mage’s ribcage and pierced his heart. Betancourt could not even scream. His eyes widened with shock and betrayal and disappointment. Zevran twisted the dagger, and the mage slumped to the ground.

“Sorry, my friend,” Zevran said kindly. “You knew too much, and did not offer your services to our leader.” He squatted down, and deftly retrieved the three sovereigns Bronwyn had given the man. “We have arranged a passage for you that is entirely free of charge.”

Leliana sighed, and whispered a prayer. Sten gathered up the dead man, and slipped him into the water.

“You do not look surprised,” Zevran said to the Qunari, as he distributed the coins.

“Hardly. It was the logical thing to do.”

The mage’s limp body sank into the dark water, and began its slow journey out of Denerim Harbor toward the deep blue



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of the Amaranthine Ocean. The three companions turned, and made their way back to the Gnawed Noble Tavern.



ZEVRAŃ ARANAĪ, OF ANTIVA

CHAPTER 3

HOUSE
COUSLAND
AGAINST THE
WORLD

THE QUEEN'S PRIVATE SITTING ROOM WAS IN DISARRAY, BUT IT WAS ALWAYS IN DISARRAY WHEN THE KING WAS IN DENE-

RIM. He *would* move the chairs from their carefully arranged positions; he lounged and put his boots on the low table; he threw cushions out of his way and onto the floor. The brocade draperies fluttered, their ends trailing out the windows like banners, because the King always threw open the windows and sat on the sills. And, of course, he demanded something more substantial than cucumber sandwiches for tea-time with the Queen. He liked those, too, and it was necessary to make extra when he visited, but along with them were a number of the high-heaped roast beef-smoked cheese-and-mustard sandwiches he particularly favored. At the moment, crusts decorated the little table, and crumbs dotted the silk carpet beneath the settee. The plate of honey cakes, marchepane horns, and oatmeal cookies was as yet untouched, forgotten in the confusion of the unexpected news.

"No, Your Majesties. It's absolutely certain," the guardsman told them breathlessly. "The Girl Warden chose a king for the dwarves, and he agreed to honor their treaty. There are dwarves marching south to Ostagar! Thousands of them!"

Anora interrogated the man a little further, dismissed him, and considered this matter in silence, while her royal husband jumped to his feet and started pacing. The afternoon light was just starting to soften to old gold. She ate her cucumber sandwich with disciplined relish, and watched Cailan wear out the silk carpet.

"I thought she might have gone to Orlais to make some sort of deal," Cailan burst out, when the messenger was gone. "Since you showed me Howe's letters, I thought it had all fallen into place."

"If you will remember," Anora said patiently, "I said at the time that those letters *might* be forgeries. I find it hard to believe that Bryce and Eleanor were plotting with the Orlesians. And I can't see why Bronwyn would want to marry an Imperial Prince."

"Well, Bryce and Eleanor are dead!" Cailan pointed out. "And she could be looking for the crown for herself! It all makes sense! Leaving the army when it needed Grey Wardens! Taking so long to enforce the treaties —"

"I hardly think three months is a *long* time. In fact —"

"— It looked to me like she was after the crown! And Fergus would be Teyrn of Highever, and that would put them in a very, very strong position. And if she did marry Prince Flo-

restan, then the Orlesians would be bound to support her!"

Anora took a deep breath. "But she did not do those things. Instead, it seems that a large dwarven army is coming to our aid, making the Orlesians superfluous. Father thinks very highly of Bronwyn Cousland, and he'll think even more highly of her now."

Cailan threw himself into his chair, sulking. He hated it when he thought he had found out something amazing and secret, and was proved wrong. And it was all so very inconvenient, anyway. Bronwyn had taken so long that he had presumed her mission to the dwarves a failure. Once that was clearly established, no one would be able to protest when he gave Celene permission to send her troops over the border. At least it didn't look like Bronwyn was after his crown. Yet. He *could* tell Anora that Bryce had been trying to persuade him to set Anora aside and marry Bronwyn, but that would hurt Anora's feelings, and give her a hint that something of the sort was in the works.

As if he would set Anora aside for just another nobleman's daughter!

This was such a bother! He had really wanted this opportunity to prove that Ferelden and Orlais were entering a new era of friendship and cooperation, and now Bronwyn Cousland had spoiled it all with her meddling. Of course Anora did not understand, since he had not shared his plans with her. She would play only a limited part in them, which was sad in a way, but she would be

handsomely provided for, and would understand, in the end. They would always be friends.

Duncan would have understood, and *not* got in his way. Cailan missed Duncan a great deal. *Duncan* would not have deserted the army in its hour of need. Bronwyn should have stayed, and sent Alistair to enforce the treaties, or she should have gone by herself, and left Alistair. His own wounds had been due to her selfishness.

He sniped, "I know exactly what your father thinks of Bronwyn Cousland! He *fancies* her! I never thought I would see the day when the Hero of River Dane's judgment was impaired by a pretty face."

Anora took a deep breath, not sure if she was comfortable with the idea that her father fancied anybody. "I am sure my father's judgment is *not* impaired. Bronwyn has done wonders in a very short time –"

Cailan offered an irritated grunt, still pacing. Anora went on, quietly and persuasively. "And much of this will be resolved if Arl Howe comes before the Landsmeet. He must have received your summons by now. If he has proper evidence – and not these copies, which could be written by anybody – let him present it. It cannot affect Bronwyn, since she is now a Grey Warden, and I hope that Fergus will not be implicated..."

"If he is," Cailan said with inexorable virtue, "he must still bear the burden of his family's treason. Very sad, but there you are. I shall have to think about whether Howe

can keep both Highever and Amaranthine."

"I think giving nearly the whole of the north of Ferelden to one man is an *extremely* bad idea," Anora declared.

"Not if he's truly loyal. It simplifies things, really."

"Will you go south to greet the dwarves?"

Cailan pursed his mouth. It *would* be rather historical, but...

"No. There's too much for me to do here, with the Landsmeet and whatnot. I can't let the Cousland and Howe feud go unresolved. I need to be here when Howe arrives with his evidence."

"And if Howe does not arrive within the week," Anora insisted, "you must allow Fergus Cousland to march on Amaranthine." She saw the look on Cailan's face and repeated herself. "Yes. You *must*. If he does not come, then that's proof positive that his evidence is rubbish, and only a pretext for a power grab. One way or another, this situation must be resolved, and *soon*."



"You need to keep your heels down, Astrid," Cullen said gently. "You have better control that way."

"You're doing awfully well," Alistair encouraged her.

Astrid, once Gytha, Lady Aeducan, gave him a serious nod. If she was going to be a surfer, then by the Stone, she was going to be good at it. It had not escaped her that riding a horse was a sign of power and prestige here on the surface.

She cast an eye on the supply train they were guarding, and smiled grimly. Now that she was a Grey Warden, her

fellow dwarves were forced to admit her existence once more. It had been awkward for them, but sod that.

With luck, Bronwyn would return in a few days from her mysterious mission to the Fereldan capital. When she arrived, Astrid believed she would be pleased with the situation. Alistair was a shy young man, unused to command. With Astrid's guidance however, he had kept the convoy moving along well.

The contingents of dwarven warriors needed time to get used to the surface. Astrid had detailed her fellow dwarves, Oghren and Brosca, to mentor and encourage them. This was a great undertaking, worthy of an Aeducan, and Astrid intended for it to be a success. Surfer maps were a bit unusual, but she was becoming accustomed to them, too.

The mage Anders was coming back up the line, a grin on his handsome face.

"I've made more of that ointment, Astrid! Tell everyone to slather it on any exposed skin. Here, you too. Lean over and let me put it on you. Your nose is looking a bit pink."

She cautiously leaned out of the saddle, and permitted the mage the liberty of anointing her distinguished Aeducan nose with his concoction. It was a disturbing notion that the sun could actually burn one's skin when one stood out in it too long. Supposedly, after a time, one simply turned brown, but Astrid had not turned brown yet. It was considerate of Anders to think of easing her discomfort.

He was a fellow Grey Warden, after all, like Alistair and Cullen. Like the casteless girl Brosca, too. While it was easier to accept warriors like Alistair and Cullen – and even the talented mage Anders, too – as equals, the casteless girl had something in her, too.

It only made sense that there were differences among the casteless. She had seen for herself that many casteless served reliably in the Legion of the Dead. Brosca was an excellent fighter and a cheerful companion. There was something in her blood that had raised her above the level of mere Duster trash. Her sister, too, must have unusual qualities to have ensnared Bhelen. That she was beautiful was undoubted, but Bhelen would have wanted something more.

Of course, Astrid considered, one never spoke of it, but something must happen to the girl babies of noble-hunters. They remained at the bottom of society with their mothers, but they really did have the blood of their father in their veins. It was not considered nice to talk about, but it was certainly true. The Brosca girls' father might have been from a noble family. In fact, Astrid decided, there was nothing more likely.

Satisfied with that explanation, she continued her exploration of the art of horsemanship. Being on a horse was an excellent idea for an officer, here on the surface. One had wide vistas to study, and from horseback one could overcome the limitation of one's height. When she had accumulated enough coin, she would buy a horse.

Cullen and Alistair could teach her how to choose a good one. Riding had more dignity, certainly than riding in the back of a trader's wagon, the way the mage Morrigan chose to. However, if Morrigan wished to sit and read, Astrid would be quite happy to ride her horse in her stead.

Brosca and Oghren marched with the dwarves, which was very sensible and proper. She could hardly look at Oghren without wishing for Gorim instead. Her former second would certainly have Joined the Wardens with her, and would have been the Stone's Blessing. Every time she heard Oghren's raucous, ale-sodden voice, she remembered another voice: deep, reassuring, and musical. Her loyal and sensible Gorim. He had been exiled to the surface, from what she could gather. It was always possible that they might meet again, someday, but she had learned that the surface was a very big place indeed.

Anders trotted by the Feddics' trading wagon to have a word with Morrigan. She was still immersed in her mother's grimoire, and hardly had said a word to him since she opened the covers. He thought he was looking quite dashing – mage on horseback, and all that, and wanted her to notice him.

"Good morning, Bodahn!" he called out. "And to you, too, Sandal! Lovely weather we're having!"

"A fair morning to you, Warden!" the tradesmen granted. "Enchantment!" Sandal seconded happily.

"My words, exactly!" agreed Anders. He slowed his horse

to get behind the wagon, and peered in at Morrigan, sitting on a crate in the shade of the canvas cover.

"My lady! Coming out for a bit of sunshine eventually?"

She pursed her lips, and did not look up from the book. "Eventually, perhaps. This is most engrossing... and disturbing."

Anders' smile faded. "Disturbing?"

"My mother had many secrets... " Morrigan regarded him gravely. Would he help her in this? Perhaps, if she continued to be civil to him. It was worth the effort, and it was not so difficult to be civil to Anders as to some others she could name.

"This is not the time," she told him in a low voice. "I must finish this, and then we shall talk. What I found here is unexpected. This is not the book I believed it to be, but it is nonetheless something my mother would not want me to know. I promise that I shall come out later and we shall... fly... together, but for now I must read this to the end."

"Vaughan's not happy with me. Not happy at all. No help for it though," Arl Urien told Fergus Cousland. "A few months more in the chill of the south will finish me off for good. I asked the boy outright if that was what he had in mind! Told him he should be looking to you as an example, instead those parasites he surrounds himself with. Slack and soft-handed, the lot of them!"

Fergus sighed, and made himself listen with only sympathy on his face. The Common Room of the Gnawed Noble

was not the place to be going on and on about the shortcomings of the future Arl of Denerim, though the entire city knew them already. He finished his wine, and glanced about, hoping that Bann Ceorlic had not yet arrived. The man was known to spend a good part of his afternoons here everyday, and if Ceorlic saw him, he would want to corner Fergus and complain about Bronwyn and his bloody horses one more time.

He resented having to spend yet another day in Denerim, anyway. Everything was in readiness for the march north against Howe, and yet the King, for reasons of his own, had Fergus cooling his heels at Court functions. It was odious and unpleasant to accept the empty sympathy of people who had hardly known his parents, and painful to acknowledge the sentiments of those who had.

The Queen, however, had been notably considerate and tactful. She had called him in for a private audience and spoke very kindly of his family.

"Eleanor, especially, was dear to me..."

He accepted her words more easily than those of others, and was glad to meet with her. The Queen knew what was going on in Denerim better than most, and Fergus had an uneasy feeling that there were things going on behind the scenes about which he was completely in the dark.

Urien drew his attention again, having more to say about The Degenerate Youth of Today – always, of course, excepting Fergus.

A shadow fell on him. He looked up to see a pretty, well-dressed elf girl – probably some sort of upper servant – standing shyly by his settee, a sealed note extended in his direction.

"My lords," she said softly, and dropped a little bob of a curtsy.

Urien was eyeing her with more than grandfatherly interest. Fergus grimaced and unsealed the note. Probably some sort of petition...

Fergus –

Do not say anything, or even look surprised. Yes, it is your only sister, and not a prank! I'm here in Denerim, and I'm down the hall in the second suite to the right. No one can know that I'm here. No one.

One of our party is pretending to be our cousin Vera Porodolin, here from Ostwick, and I'm playing the part of a bodyguard. The bearer of this message is a fellow Grey Warden, so be polite. I have so much to tell you. Get away from Arl Urien as soon as you can!

Bronwyn

Fergus controlled his face with an effort, and looked up at the pretty elf with a smile.

"Yes, I'll see to it directly."

The elf backed away politely – completing the picture of the well-trained servant – and vanished down the hall, her light footfalls muffled to silence by the rich green carpets.

"Good news?" asked Urien, full of curiosity.

"More teyrnir business. I'm afraid I have to leave our

pleasant corner here and get back to work. I'm sure Vaughan will do very well, once he's put to it, Urien. Perhaps all he's needed is a real challenge. I shall see you at the Palace tonight, I trust?"

"Indeed you shall."

Second suite to the right. Excitement quickened his step. What was Bronwyn up to this time? Hiding from Bann Ceorlic, most likely, and he could hardly blame her. But why was she in Denerim, at all? A niggling worry that this might be a trap crossed his mind, just before he heard the muffled "woof!"

The door cracked open, and Scout was pushing out past the pretty elf, panting eagerly, stubby tail vibrating.

"Hello to you, old fellow!"

There were others in the handsome, paneled room: another elf, a tall Qunari, a beautiful black-haired lady, and...

"Get in here!" Bronwyn whispered. She gave him a hard tug, and threw his arms around him, while the others shut the door quickly and quietly.

"Bronwyn!" he gasped, "Your eyes!"

Her hand jerked to cover them, and then she forced herself to laugh about it. "They're fine! I see perfectly well. It was a fluke, but no lasting harm was done, other than changing the color." She saw his eyes drift to her scarred face, concerned and grieved, and she said, more firmly, "I'm fine. Let me introduce you to my companions."

She gestured around the room. "These are our friends



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Sten of the Beresaad, and Zevran Aranai from Antiva... ”

“Antiva!” Fergus’ eyes lit with memory

“...and these are my fellow Grey Wardens, Tara Surana of the Circle of Magi, and Leliana, formerly of the Lothering Chantry. She’s been using the name and identity of our cousin Vera Porodolin...”

Fergus laughed. “You’re much better looking than our cousin from Ostwick!”

Leliana beamed in response. “You are too kind, my lord. It is easier to pretend to be a real person than to invent an identity.”

“Please excuse us, all of you,” Bronwyn said, putting a hand on Fergus’ arm. “I must speak to my brother in private.”

They moved into the inner bedchamber, and Bronwyn gestured at a chair. She poured him some wine, and then sat down opposite him.

“Nice armor,” he commented.

A half-smile. “I found it in a Grey Warden cache here in Denerim. The wretched stuff I was wearing was ready to disintegrate. Now tell me: why is the King in Denerim, and why are you with him? Is the war in the south going that well?”

Fergus grimaced, and knew there was no time to be anything other than frank. “We’re doing well enough. The fact is that the King suffered a minor wound, and it was the tipping point for him. He’s sick of fighting darkspawn and bored with the lack of amusement. He was also...” he voice slowed “...disappointed in his hopes of the Grey



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Wardens riding in to save the day. He’s been complaining of you, pup.”

“Has he, now?”

Fergus looked at his sister, startled. He had never heard such a snarl issue from her throat.

Bronwyn said, “Well, as it happens, the Grey Wardens are even now riding to his bloody rescue! I secured the dwarven alliance, and they’re sending five thousand warriors to Ostagar right now, along with most of the Legion of the Dead, which makes another thousand. Now that I’ve taken care of my business in Denerim, I’m riding back to join the rest of the Wardens and the dwarves as they travel down to Ostagar.” She rose, and began pacing, seething with anger. “So he’s *disappointed*, is he? Not nearly so disappointed as I am in him!”

“You’ve got the dwarves?” Fergus looked up at her in amazement. “That’s bloody marvelous! I heard they were engaged in some sort of succession crisis.”

“I sent you a huge letter with the whole story, and I haven’t time to recount it today. I resolved the crisis, chose the king, and the king agreed to honor the treaty.” Her voice softened. “Plenty happened to me in Orzammar, Fergus, and even more in the Deep Roads. That’s where I got this...” she gave a look of distaste, and gestured at her face, “...this altered appearance. I met a new kind of darkspawn — don’t worry, it never comes to the surface — and it spat poison in my eyes and then tried to claw my face

off. Believe it or not, I was lucky. But that's not why I'm so relieved to see you, Fergus. I've found some things out: things you have to know. People are plotting behind the scenes, and you are going to end up dead or exiled unless we make some wise choices."

"What do you mean?"

"It's complicated. It involves some really devious Orlesian plotting, and the reason why Howe attacked us. You're not going to like what I'm going to tell you, but I have the papers to prove it. It came to my attention when a very well-armed band of mercenaries tried to kill me near the border..."

She told that part of the nasty little story fairly quickly, and then added the Orlesian plan to kidnap Alistair and herself.

Fergus nodded. "I can see why the Orlesians would want to browbeat the King into giving leave for their Wardens and chevaliers to enter Ferelden. I asked the King in fact, if we could get the Wardens without the chevaliers, and he says not."

Bronwyn sprawled in her own chair, snorting. "The King would have loved the opportunity. Complaining about me is a way of setting the stage for the admission of the Orlesians. I'm not saying he was in the plot to kidnap us himself, but he wouldn't regret it for a minute – and I'll tell you more about that later."

"You're not just a Warden, pup. And if you're right about Alistair, the Orlesians could have used you other ways. They could even try to present you as a client king and queen!"

She nodded slowly, frowning. In the light slanting through

the shutters, she looked vaguely menacing. "Believe it or not, that had occurred to me, but I didn't want to put that in writing. Even writing it down might be construed by a stranger as a secret desire to put myself forward for the throne. Except I don't think that's what the Orlesians had in mind at all. Based on what I've learned, I believe they wanted not only to deprive Ferelden of its Wardens, but of possible alternatives to Cailan, if things started going wrong."

"You mean... if he were killed?"

"Well, that could certainly happen, but I'm thinking more in another direction. If Cailan were to do something..." she sighed deeply, and started up again. "...something profoundly offensive to the majority of Fereldans, it would be easier for him if there were no other viable candidates for the throne. Among other things, brother, I am urging you to be very, very careful. Howe sent a party of Crows after me, and it's likely he'll do the same for you. Watch what you eat and drink. And don't try to disagree with me. You know I'm right."

He grunted. "I do. And I am. I try to be inconspicuous about it. Crows, you say? They're supposed to be tough."

She shrugged. "I didn't give them a chance to show how tough they were. Maybe they had an off day. Keep your loyal men close. And now I'm going to get to the dark heart of the matter, Fergus, and you will like this even less. We discovered the name of the woman who sent the assassins at the border. She was an Orlesian bard, by name Marjo-

laine, who had dealings with most of the nobility of Ferelden and worked out of Denerim. Many letters went through her hands: letters to the King, letters to the Empress, letters from one noble to another. Some letters she transmitted, and other were... altered... to suit her purposes."

She leaned forward, unnervingly green eyes intense. Fergus tried not to look away and pain her by his discomfort. They were like the eyes of a serpent, full of mysterious light. She steepled her fingers, and said, "Do you know that there is plotting afoot for the King to divorce the Queen and replace her with another?"

"One hears things, of course. How could he? Loghain commands the Army, and wouldn't tolerate it! You'd have to be mad to get involved in that."

"I regret to tell you then, that Father *was* involved in it. Up to his neck. He was not only talking with his peers — notably Eamon Guerrin and Urien Kendells — but he was in negotiations with the King."

"He had written to the King?" Fergus sat up straight, horrified at what he might hear next.

"He had, and I think you can guess whom he suggested as a worthy replacement for Queen Anora."

Fergus was silent a moment. "Oh, pup. Don't be angry, but I can see why..."

"Yes, certainly. And if it hadn't been for the Blight, it might not have been so horribly dangerous. I'm sure he felt it would be for the best, and that I would understand

that it was my duty, but I can't say I'm happy to know that he never had the least intention of keeping his word to me."

"Pup, whatever he did, he did because he loved you and wanted the best for you..."

She hissed at him, her eyes more snake-like than ever. "I *know!* I will forgive him someday, but I wonder if you will, for that little plot is what led to Howe's attack on our castle."

"What do you mean?"

"I've been through the bard's correspondence... there's a bit more to go, but I've seen the balance of it. Cailan was not in the least interested in me, I'm sure. He was only stringing Father along. I killed that bard last night, you see, and one of my finds was a present he intended for the Empress."

A chill up his spine. Fergus tried to make light of it. "And what is he giving her? A wheel of cheese? A mabari music box?"

Bronwyn smiled coldly. "He was giving her Ferelden."

Then he too had to read the letters and the clever forgeries, and the fulsome letter in which Cailan declared his previously unknown passion for a distant monarch whom he had never met in the flesh. He had had help, for spelled out in it was the complete arrangement: Orlais and Ferelden united as equal partners in a great Empire; Cailan to be Emperor of both; Celene to receive the title of Queen of Ferelden when in that country; the child of the union to be heir to the united Empire. In the event of either party's death without issue, the remaining spouse

would continue to reign over the Empire, with the succession of the two nations to be decided separately.

Fergus threw the papers aside at that point. "As if it would have any meaning at that point! I can see from this that the Landsmeet would become a mere ceremonial body, with no power at all! It's a barefaced land grab to win by marriage what they lost by war!"

"Look at some of the other items, too. They're lovely. Within a generation Ferelden freeholders would be enserfed and bound to their liege lord's estates, just as they are in Orlais. This is just appalling, Fergus. This cannot stand."

"Loghain won't let it stand," Fergus agreed, dreading the moment that the Teyrn of Gwaren learned of this. "If he knew..." He paused, and said quietly. "If he knew, he would kill the King himself."

"Just as we're going to have to kill Howe." She tossed another packet of papers down. "For this is what the bard Marjolaine made of Father's letters. She sent the forgery to Rendon Howe. She succeeded in making Father out to be after the throne, under the patronage of the Empress. If Howe believed this — and I'm sure he did, for it's quite a good forgery — he probably thought he was doing the patriotic thing, killing Father." She snorted a bitter laugh. "Marjolaine's mission in Ferelden has been quite the success. Act as a provocateur to create division and chaos among the nobility. Seduce the King into an alliance that will swallow Ferelden up like a snake swallows a goat. It

was quite clever of Marjolaine to get rid of Father. Howe will be under a cloud that will prevent Delilah being a viable candidate for Queen, and I'm a Grey Warden. The only other nobleman's daughter of any stature is Habren Bryland, and even Cousin Leonas couldn't imagine that Cailan would marry her."

"Do you think Howe has written about this to anyone?" Fergus asked.

"I'm quite sure he has," Bronwyn said grimly. "I'll bet serious money that he has sent copies of these letters to Teyrn Loghain and to the Queen. Possibly not to the King. Howe despises the King. If it came to it, I have no doubt that Howe would take Loghain's part, because he hates Orlais like poison."

"And whose part shall we take?" Fergus whispered. "Either way reeks of treason. Even if I were to agree with Howe about this great matter of the King's marriage, he is still the man who killed our family."

"Just so." Bronwyn rose and walked over the fireplace, leaning against the wall, while she thought. "Howe has to go. You're here about that, I take it?"

"The King is going to call Howe to a Landsmeet to answer for the murder of our family." He looked at Bronwyn, horror dawning in his eyes.

" — Where Howe will present the evidence of our family's treason. You'll be lucky to leave the Chamber alive. Even were you to duel him... even were you to kill him,

the stain of those forgeries will never be erased. We can't even show the originals, because that would antagonize the Queen and Loghain. No. Howe has to die, and he has to die soon, and he has to die *privately*. He cannot be allowed a public forum to use to smear the Couslands. He was duped into murdering his friend, but he *did* murder him. I think," she said, with a hint of her old mischief, "I'll do my bit to muddy the waters. My friend Leliana has a few bard's skills of her own, and we learned how Marjolaine was distributing her messages. A letter will be sent to the Arl of Amaranthine, warning him that the King's invitation is a cheat, and that if he values his life he will fortify his castle of Vigil's Keep strongly, and remain there, until Fergus Cousland is arrested for treason."

They talked a long time while day eased into twilight. It was agreed that if Cailan openly moved to divorce Anora, they would have to throw their support behind the Queen and her father. They ordered food, and Fergus ate an early supper with them all, by turns amused and horrified by their adventures. Sten and Tara went out to collect their laundry, and the companions began organizing themselves for their ride west.

Fergus was expected at the Palace very soon, and Bronwyn would not let her brother walk alone after sunset to the Palace.

"I'm not going alone," he promised her. "I'm going back to Highever House to collect my guard. I'll have them with

me all the way there and back. I don't intend to make it easy for anybody."

"I'll come with you to the house. You're a target, Fergus: I'm serious about that. You need to have people with you from now on."

"I'll come along too," Tara offered. In fact, everyone was willing to go, but Bronwyn took Tara, Sten, and Scout. She did not want to leave Leliana alone, and she did not want to leave their belongings — and their precious correspondence — unattended. Leliana and Zevran would stay and guard their quarters, while Bronwyn and the rest saw Fergus safely on his way.

"All right, then, I'll have to keep my helmet on, Fergus," Bronwyn said, "I can't afford for anyone to recognize me."

Outside, night had fallen on Denerim: a black night pierced only by a few lanterns glowing dimly over doorways. Their party was not far from Alienage gates, so Tara indignantly whispered the story of how they had been turned away.

"And look!" she hissed, gesturing out at the deserted Market District. "They *are* opening the gates for *those* people!"

Two canvas-covered wagons were drawn up in front of the gates. Very quietly, amid muttered orders, a line of elves was climbing into the back of the wagons and huddling out of sight. The guards in charge of the little party were wearing the colors of the Arl of Denerim.

The silence was broken by the cry of a young girl from the shadows.

"Don't go, Kirri! You can't trust Vaughan! We haven't heard from any of the others!"

A male elf hissed out, "Shut your stupid face, Shianni! Don't spoil things for the rest of us!"

"Typical," grumbled a woman. "There's no other way for us to get out of the Alienage and find work, and she comes along to make trouble — *as usual!*"

Another girl spoke from the shadows, her low voice curiously hoarse. "Come on, Shianni. You can't save people who don't want to be saved."

"Let go of me!" shouted the girl. "Wake up, you people! Andraste's ass, don't you see what they're doing?"

A guard nearly threw the last of the elves into the wagon, and his officer stalked back toward the gate.

"Shut that noise, there! Who are you, creeping around in the dark? You'd better come out."

"Maybe she'd like to come along for the ride!" gibed a guard. "Good idea! Quick, close the gates!" the officer barked. "That'll teach her to make trouble! Come along now and get in the wagon. You and your friend, too!"

The half-dozen guards moved in, drawing their weapons. Four of them lunged into the dark maw of the Alienage gateway as the barrier creaked shut.

"I told you this was stupid!" snarled the hoarse-voiced girl. "Run, Shianni!"

A scuffle in the shadows, a faint cry and running feet. More scrapes and thuds, and a faint spark of metal on metal.

"The bitch cut me!" roared a guard. "I'll fucking *kill* her!"

It had all happened very quickly. Just as quickly, Fergus had changed direction, his step heavy and determined.

"What's going on here!" he demanded.

The officer turned toward him, angry face yellow in the lantern light, and then paused, seeing Fergus' fine clothes. He peered closer, and his face became a mask of subservience.

"Nothing, my lord Teyrn. Just trying to do our duty. Some elf whore was interfering with Bann Vaughan's work crew."

"If she doesn't want to go with you, release her," Fergus ordered. The thought of armed men attacking helpless women made his stomach roil; made him think of things he kept as far as possible from his conscious mind.

A guard swore again, dragging the girl toward them. "Stinking little knife-ear *cut* me! She's got a knife. 'Tisn't *legal* for elves to have weapons!"

"Shut up, Greer!" one of the guards muttered at him. "It's the Teyrn of Highever!"

They could see the girl now: a small, hunched form in the grasp of two large men. Fergus walked over to have a look. Bronwyn sighed and followed, gesturing at Sten to hold the lantern so her brother could see better.

The girl was scrawny, like most Alienage elves, but with a sinewy, wiry look to her. Her short-cropped hair was matted and filthy. Her clothing consisted of a ragged, shapeless gown over a coarse shift, and both she and the garments smelled unclean. Her eyes were black burnt



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holes of fear and defiance. One guard indignantly held out the little knife.

"See, my lord? Carrying a *weapon!*"

Fergus turned it over in his hands. It was double-bladed dagger, razor-sharp, and of no metal that Bronwyn recognized.

It was not unknown to Fergus, however, who had traveled further in the southern forests. "This is Dalish iron-bark! Where did you get this?"

The girl growled back in her hoarse voice, "I didn't steal it, if that's what you mean!"

The officer cuffed her quickly. "Speak properly to his lordship!"

"My mother gave it to me, my *lord,*" the girl croaked sullenly. "It's *mine.*"

"It's a fine knife," Fergus said, studying the markings in the dim light. "What's your name, girl?"

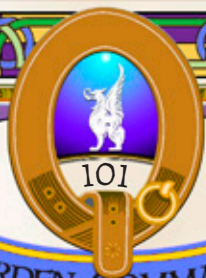
A pause. "Adaia."

A false name, clearly.

"Well, Captain," Fergus said to the officer in his mildest tones, "it seems to me that even elves need knives to eat with."

"That's as may be, my lord," The officer replied stiffly, "but she'll have to come with us now. The Bann's orders were to open the gates only for the work crews, and to keep the Alienage locked up tight otherwise."

"She can come with me," Fergus said, carefully casual. "I need another kitchenmaid anyway. As for you," he said coldly to the wounded man, "You wouldn't get cut if you



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didn't run at young girls with your sword out. Sometimes they get the idea that you mean to hurt them." He turned his back on the Bann's men and said, "Let's go."

Tara slipped to Adaia's side, and whispered, "Come on! Let's get away from here!"

Adaia looked around: at the looming soldiers, at the covered wagons, silent but for the breathing and whispers of the elves, at the big nobleman who had her knife, at his huge dog and the two tall bodyguards, and finally at the pretty elf girl who was whispering to her. She was clean and well-dressed, and so was probably the lord's doxy, but she didn't seem frightened or beaten-down. There was no choice. She fell into step with the nobleman's party, and followed them to an unknown fate.



Bronwyn wondered what they could do with the elf girl. She sympathized with Fergus' generous impulse, but the dirty, sullen creature was obviously unfit to be anybody's kitchenmaid. She looked more like a beggar, or... well, of course Brosca had looked worse when they had rescued her. This girl had something of the same desperate air about her.

"What's this about 'work crews' taken out at dead of night?" Bronwyn asked Fergus quietly. "What is Vaughan up to?"

"No idea. It's the first I've heard of it." He frowned to himself, thinking. They were nearing the King's Bridge when he stopped and asked the elf girl. "What kind of work? Where are they going?"

She shrank back, but Tara pushed her forward, giving her a nod.

"Don't know," Adaia croaked. "It doesn't sound right, though. That's why Shianni was worried. She's scared of everything that involves the Bann, of course, but this was different. The Bann's men say there's work that pays well north of town. If you volunteer, you're told to bring a change of clothes and three days' food and to keep your trap shut and be at the Market gate after dark. Nobody's come back yet, and it's been going on for a couple months. They even let people bring their children. A lot of people have gone."

"Three days' food," Bronwyn muttered. "North." She and Fergus looked at each other. "Amaranthine?"

"Where else? So it could be that Vaughan is sending laborers to Howe. What are they up to? Maybe working on the fortifications of Vigil's Keep or Amaranthine City?" He turned to Adaia. "Did Vaughan or his men say anything about Arl Howe?"

She stepped back, alarmed, and shook her head. "I haven't seen Bann Vaughan since... I don't go out much. I just hear what people say. I wasn't going to go with them! I was only out because I was trying to take care of Shianni."

Tara said, looking at the girl's neck, "Is your throat hurt? Did they grab you there?"

Adaia shrugged her off. "It happened months ago. My voice has been like this ever since."

Bronwyn asked her outright, "Are you in trouble with

the Bann?"

The girl studied the ground. "Might be. My name is on a paper they put up on the gates, so I stay in the cellar, mostly."

Fergus asked, "What did you do?"

She wanted her knife, very badly. Looking away, her hoarse voice thick with misery, she said, "I was stupid. I washed myself and dressed in my best, and I went outside where sherns could see me. If you're dirty they don't look at you as much."

"What did you *do*?" he repeated impatiently.

She whispered, "I said 'no.'" She flicked a glance up at Fergus and then looked away. "My cousin killed a guard and I got away. He didn't. I can't let the guardsmen know who I am."

Bronwyn turned to Fergus, "So Adaia is certainly not her real name. I think having her in your kitchens would be a very bad idea. You know how servants talk. If Vaughan is involved with Howe in some way, you don't need this sort of complication."

Tara spoke up. "She can come with us!"

Sten broke his silence. "We must ride fast. This girl will slow us down."

"No, she won't!" Tara said fiercely. "The two of us won't weigh as much as you... or even as much as Bronwyn in all her armor!" She whirled on Adaia, "Can you cook and sew?"

"Of course..."

"Can you do laundry?"

"Yes."



"Well, then!" Tara pleaded with Bronwyn, "Let her come with us! There's work for her with the army, and she'll be safe!"

"Tara..." Bronwyn sighed, recognizing her own pity come back to bite her. She had rescued Tara out of pity, and now Tara was moved in the same way. On the other hand, Tara had proved a brave and useful companion... She sighed again, and addressed Adaia. "All right then. You'll have to come with us. We're going south to the army. You'll work and you'll be paid, and no one will meddle with you. In return, you will keep silent about us being here in Denerim."

"I don't want anybody to know I'm from Denerim!" the girl said quickly. "I'm not a whore, though. I won't do that!"

Bronwyn snapped, "Nobody's asking you to! Now be quiet and come along."

After a long and weary walk, Adaia had the courage to whisper back to Tara, "Where are they taking us now?"

"The teyrn is going to his house to find his his guardsmen. Then he's going to the Palace. We'll return to our inn afterward, I suppose."

"Will he give me my knife back?"

"Probably. You'll want it where we're going."

Emboldened, Adaia croaked out, "Can I have my knife back, my lord?"

Fergus snorted, and pulled it from his belt. "Here," he grunted. "Be careful where you stick it. You said it was your mother's. Was she Dalish?"

The girl growled, "Grandmother. My lord," she added hastily.



Ahead, the King's Bridge threw out its ancient stone span over the River Drakon. A dim lantern guttered on a pillar at their end. The other end was dark. Bronwyn felt the slightest prickling...

A deep musical hum through the air, and Bronwyn shoved Fergus to the side, out of the way of a sudden volley of arrows.

"Stay behind me!" she shouted.

"Sod that!" Fergus shouted back, drawing his long daggers from his fine tall boots.

Scout growled, barreling down the length of the bridge at the dim figures there. Sten lifted Asala, and roared a challenge, the arrows deflecting from his plate armor with a series of disappointed thunks.

Tara shouted, too. Lightning spurted from her hands, leaping ahead of her companions, sizzling up the attackers from head to toe. Cries of pain and shock shattered the night. She ran forward, gathering herself for another burst of magic. Beside her, the girl who called herself Adaia jumped away, fearfully startled. Magic! The friendly elf girl was a *mage*!

While she hesitated, trying to balance "friendly" and "elf" against the dreadful word "*mage*," an arrow cracked against the stone rail of the bridge, only a foot to her left. Whoever was attacking them did not care that she had just met these people. For a terrible instant, she thought it might be Bann Vaughan himself, come to finish what he had started. She could run, and maybe get an arrow between her shoulder

blades, or she could stay with her new companions, and hope to escape from Vaughan altogether.

So she followed them, crouching low, clinging to the shadowy side of the bridge. Fang was in her hand again, and felt good there.

Bronwyn saw a tripwire and jumped over it, yelling, "Trap!" Fergus stumbled briefly, and Sten tore through it, unhindered. Ahead were more traps: leghold traps, camouflaged by piles of trash and straw. Fergus avoided them easily, not inclined to walk in filth while wearing fine boots. Sten was caught by one and dragged it along, snarling until he could kick it away. More arrows came their way, and Tara shouted again. An archer froze in place, and another moved slowly, as if caught in tar.

A swordsman leaped out at them, quick and silent, his white teeth flashing in a fierce grin. Bronwyn crossed blades with him, and he parried quickly, the dagger in his left hand darting out like a serpent's tongue. It scraped along her side, defeated by dragonbone and Master Wade's skill. Scout flanked him, and tore at him with teeth and claw. Another attacker burst from the shadows, sword lifted to cut Scout in two. Fergus lunged, and wrapped an elbow around the man neck, dragging him backward. He gritted his teeth and plunged a dagger exactly into the spot his father had circled on a diagram a lifetime ago. He threw the dead man aside and went after one of the archers.

There was another archer, up on a roof overlooking the

bridge. Tara hissed in anger at the arrow sticking in the skirt of her fine dress. It could be mended, but it would always show. The archer turned to ice, and toppled into the black current of the Drakon with a heavy splash. Another man rushed at her, and was struck by a bolt of lightning. He spun around and fell hard, and Adaia crept quickly from the side of the bridge, and buried Fang in his chest.

A pair of assassins tried to break away and retreat back into the alleyways. They could not hide from Scout, and Bronwyn raced along with him, her sword arcing out to catch one along the back of the neck, severing his spine, and dropping him with a single sharp cry. Scout leaped on the other, a fearsome sight on his hind legs, as tall as the man himself as he bit down on the man's head and shook it. The horrified screams were muffled, and then silenced.

"Come on!" Bronwyn ordered, and raced back to find Fergus.

His velvet sleeve was torn, and his pale skin glistened with blood. Nonetheless, he was toe-to-toe with one of the assassins, and had knocked the sword from the man's hands. He was now grappling for his dagger. Sten, who had just killed his man, turned to hack at Fergus' opponent, when Bronwyn shouted, "We want to talk to that one!"

Sten reversed his sword, and rapped the man's head smartly with the pommel. Stunned, the assassin staggered, and was thrown to the ground.

Bronwyn pounced on him like a mabari herself, while Sten held Asala to the man's throat. "Are you a Crow?"

Bronwyn demanded.

The man grinned up at her, defiant in the face of certain death. One of his handsome white teeth had been knocked out, and blood trickled over his lips.

Bronwyn grinned back, and asked, "Were you paid for silence?"

The assassin snorted, and shrugged as best he could with a warrior on his chest. "I was not paid to answer your questions."

Fergus asked, clutching his wounded arm, "Who hired you?"

The assassin shut his mouth, and looked stubborn. Bronwyn pressed her dagger to the man's face. "That's three questions you have not answered. This can be a great deal more unpleasant than it needs to be. Let us start again. Are you a Crow?"

No answer. Bronwyn hissed, and flicked the dagger tip up, slicing the man's nostril up to the bridge of his nose. He cried out, shocked. Fergus gasped, but forced himself to let his sister do as she saw fit. He had no use for the man himself. Even if the assassin were taken before the Landsmeet and testified openly that Howe had hired him, who would care? Everyone already knew that Howe had murdered his family.

The man winced, and sniffed away some of the blood in his nose. He ground out. "Yes. I am a Crow. The contract on Fergus Cousland was paid for by the Arl of Amaranthine."

"As was the contract on Bronwyn Cousland," Bronwyn told him, smirking. "That failed, too, by the way." The

man's eyes opened wide, just for a moment, and he sighed. Bronwyn asked, "I understand that your master here in Denerim is a man named Ignacio. Does he still live at the House of White Flowers? In the Market District?"

"You are well informed. Yes. He lives there still."

"Really? How convenient." She looked at him a moment more, thinking of Zevran, and then decided she had shown all the mercy in her for one evening. Still, she asked, "What is your name?"

He smiled then, perfectly calm. "Taliesin. My name is Taliesin."

Bronwyn rose from his chest, and nodded to Sten. "That's all, then."

Sten stabbed down with his huge blade, and the assassin writhed briefly. He lay still, and they walked on. Tara hung back to go through the fallen assassins' pockets. Adaia crept up beside her, her eyes wide at the quick glint of gold pieces disappearing into the mage's purse.

"Here," Tara whispered, giving the girl a coin. "You helped." She hurried ahead to heal the teyrn's arm. She was nowhere as skilled as Anders, but she could do that much. He was as nice and polite as his sister.

"Thank you," he said, marveling at how quickly she healed his wound. Then he regarded his torn sleeve with annoyance. "So much for this doublet," he said, "Their Majesties will simply have to wait until I change."

"Fergus..." Bronwyn thought a little more as they walked, and then said, "I am going to write to the Warden-Com-

mander in Antiva, and inform him that the Crows have been interfering with the Grey Wardens during a Blight. Considering how hard Antiva was hit in the past, I'm sure such behavior is quite unacceptable. I don't think the Crows want to have the Grey Wardens declaring blood feud on them. I shall send it before I leave in the morning. My friend Zevran tells me that a ship named the SIREN'S CALL is leaving for Antiva City the day after tomorrow. Perhaps you should write to Oriana's family, and tell them what has happened."

He stopped dead, and suddenly had a very good idea. "I'll write." He smiled grimly. "Certainly. Oriana's family was... connected, so to speak. All the great merchant families are. I shall let them know what Arl Rendon Howe did to their daughter and to her child. I shall tell them that Howe has hired Crows to finish off the rest of their family, but that they might be amenable to the pressure of a higher bid. It would be extremely convenient if Rendon Howe were to die of natural causes as soon as possible. It would be most satisfactory if those natural causes were extremely painful."

Bronwyn smiled darkly and nodded, very pleased. However great a satisfaction it would be to kill Rendon Howe in a fair, public fight, it was more important simply that he be dead. If he died of what appeared to be natural causes, it might not even be necessary to pursue the feud with the rest of the family. She only suggested, "Whomever they send should take Howe's private papers as well, and forward them on to you."

Highever House loomed ahead at last, tall and black above the other roofs of Denerim. Lanterns burned in the courtyard. Bronwyn looked at it longingly, thinking of her room and her bed and her things stored in her own chests. Fergus clapped her on the shoulder.

"I wish you could come in."

"I wish I could, too. I hate leaving you here in this pit of vipers, but our day will come." She whispered, "Be careful, Fergus. Go armed and armored *everywhere* from now on. There are hands raised against you in secret. Beware of the Kendells, since they have some sort of alliance with a traitor. Beware of the King, whose mood shifts with every passing breeze. Above all, beware of Howe." She embraced him, hoping it was not for the last time. "Maker watch over you, brother."

He squeezed her hard, heedless of the stout chainmail. "Maker watch over us all."

They dragged themselves to the Gnawed Noble, bloody and sweaty and filthy. Leliana had managed to wheedle a great deal of hot water from the innkeeper Edwina, wanting to wash the black dye from her hair; thinking that baths their last night in Denerim would be pleasant. They were essential, as it happened.

Their new addition was greeted with bemusement, and Leliana and Tara threw her into the bath to plane off the crust of filth, heedless of her protests. Adaia's hair proved to be a

fine dark gold, and not dirt brown, as they first thought. Leliana produced some scissors, and cut it a little more neatly. The girl's clothing was fit for nothing but rags. Tara thought she had seen something in the cache that would fit her. It involved going out again, since there would be no time in the morning, so the light hunting leathers were gathered up and brought back, and Tara gave the girl clean smallclothes of her own. The armor was designed for a man. Luckily, Adaia had almost no breasts, and it fit well enough. Some pillows and a blanket were arranged on the floor of the bedchamber for her, and she curled up by the fire and was asleep instantly. Scout went over to sniff at her, and then *whuffed* and lay down at her side.

"Think she's all right, do you, boy?"

He blinked calmly, and his eyes closed, too.

There was still work to be done. Leliana could imitate Marjolaine's handwriting very well, and wrote a message to Rendon Howe, warning him to stay in Amaranthine. Bronwyn wrote her own indignant letter to the Antivan Warden-Commander.

With first light, they had reclaimed their horses from the stable, packed their gear, gave the first letter to the barkeep of the Gnawed Noble, and delivered the second to Captain Isabela. After that they made their way through the Great Gate, and were soon riding hard on the West Road, on the first leg of their journey that would lead them back to Ostagar, and war.

CHAPTER 4

THE WAY OF
THREE TREES

S THE WARDEN-LED DWARVEN ARMY MARCHED SOUTH, THEY BEGAN ATTRACTING ATTENTION.

While most of the dwarven army was fighting and chiseling its way through long-deserted Deep Roads, enough of their forces were above ground to make them an attractive target for those who always followed armies. Traders, gamblers, thieves, would-be and has-been soldiers, minstrels, scavengers and whores: all them were drawn to the troops on the march south.

It was at the last camp before Lake Belennas where Alistair heard the full details of the disaster at Redcliffe. The sun was low in the sky, and the tents were being pitched by a group of dwarven servitors. It was a good campsite, on fairly high ground: dry, but with water not too far; defensible, and just off the road.

Granted, the shifty trader who told Alistair the tale did not seem a particularly credible witness, but even if a fraction of the news was true, it was shocking and dreadful.

"...And the old Arl's son was a mage! A mage! Think of

it. Possessed by a demon, he was. Killed his own mother! It took the King and Teyrn Loghain himself to sort it all out. The King stabbed that abomination right through the heart, and that was the end of it!"

Alistair tried to take it all in. and wished he could call the man a liar. "The King killed Connor?" He asked, heart-sick. How old was the boy? Nine? Ten?

"Well... he had to, didn't he?" the grubby little man shot back. "An abomination and all. Nearly the whole town of Redcliffe dead. The new Arl will be put to it, cleaning up that mess."

Alistair regarded the messenger of evil tidings with loathing, and turned away, sitting in silence in front of the Wardens' campfire. The man shrugged, and left to share the thrilling gossip with someone more receptive.

Morrigan was curled up with a book, as far from Alistair as possible. Oghren, Brosca, and Anders were playing cards. Since Oghren was fairly sober, he was winning handily. Anders threw down his hand in disgust, and left to join Morrigan. Cullen noticed the look on Alistair's face, and sat down by him.

"I'm sorry," Cullen said quietly. "I heard that you're from Redcliffe. You must know some of those people."

"The old Arl was my guardian," Alistair told him. "He sent me to the Chantry when I was ten, but I spent my earlier years in Redcliffe. I knew the Arlessa. I saw Connor, that poor little boy, when he was a baby. I know Arl Teagan. He's a good man. I just wish there was something I could do."

Astrid sat down with them, nursing a mug of ale. "You are from a noble house?"

Alistair hesitated, torn between the desire for her to think well of him, and the habitual rejection of his birth. He temporized. "I'm no relation to the Arl. I was just fostered there."

Astrid frowned. It was not unheard of for noble houses to foster one another's children: it was a way of cementing alliances by providing mutual hostages as surety. Why would a nobleman be guardian to a lower-caste child? The fact that Alistair appeared reluctant to speak of his paternity indicated that there was a secret there.

"Ha!" bellowed Oghren. "Oghren wins again!"

"You cheated!" Brosca shouted back over Oghren's booming laughter.

"Wardens!" called a young dwarf, on guard outside the camp. "Horsemen approaching! They've got a wagon, too."

Astrid rose. "Someone has to speak to them." She gave Alistair a hard nudge.

"Ow!"

"That means *you*, Senior Warden."

"Oh." He had not been doing so badly, he felt. He had maps and orders, and had followed them pretty faithfully. Strange men on horseback were not in Bronwyn's plans. He hoped they were nice horsemen.

He walked out to where the guards were calling to the small party to identify themselves.

"— the Arl of Redcliffe..."

Alistair paused, and thought for a moment of Arl Eamon. Who was dead. Then he smiled, and pushed past the gathering dwarven warriors. The newcomer was surrounded by a half-dozen knights, and was asking to meet with the Warden-Commander.

"Arl Teagan!"

He looked older and more careworn than he had at Ostagar, but his smile was as wide as ever. Teagan Guer-rin swung down from his horse, and came forward, arms out. Alistair grinned, happier than he had been in weeks. He was caught up in a fierce hug.

"How are you?" Alistair asked at once. "I've heard such terrible stories!"

Teagan's face creased briefly with anguish. "All true, I expect. I heard the Wardens were leading the dwarves to Ostagar. I had to come to see it for myself. Redcliffe is in grim shape, but I put together a wagon of supplies for you. It's the least I can do."

There was no doubt that the supplies were welcome. Alistair laughed. "Since you've brought supper, you might as well share it. You and your men are most welcome."

"And where is the beautiful Girl Warden?" Teagan asked, looking about. "I expected to see her at the head of the army."

"Oh," Alistair chuckled ruefully. "She'll be along soon enough. There was a problem she had to sort out. She took two of the new Wardens with her and some others, and actually left me in charge! I'm expecting to see her in the

next day or two. Disappointed?"

"Unspeakably!"

"Well, too bad, because you'll just have to make do with me. But we've added to the glad throng." He gestured at the rest of his party, now approaching to have a look at the nobleman. "Arl Teagan of Redcliffe, let me present my fellow Wardens and my good friends: Warden Cullen, Warden Astrid, Warden Freydis —"

Brosca growled, "I hate that name! Stick to Brosca!"

"Brosca, then! I don't see Warden Anders, who is no doubt chasing after Morrigan..."

"He's probably *caught* Morrigan!" cackled Oghren.

"Yes, well... he probably has. This is our friend and comrade Oghren, who's come all the way from Orzammar with us to fight the darkspawn. A motley crew, you might say, but we do pretty well."

Teagan studied all the faces. They seemed a decent group to him. Perhaps they would be good friends to Alistair: better friends than he had been himself... and better than his brother. He repeated the names, feeling he owed Alistair the courtesy of knowing his associates. Cullen was a tall and strong young man, with a knightly but modest air. A suitable companion. The dwarves were all very different from one another: Astrid was a dignified young woman, with keen, knowing eyes. Brosca had a turned-up nose, a huge grin, and a loud voice. Oghren seemed the most like the other dwarves Teagan had met:

brash, bearded, and boisterous. Of course, if he really was like most dwarves, he would be a doughty warrior, which is what was wanted at the moment.

After the exchange of pleasantries, Teagan clapped a hand on Alistair's shoulder. "If you have a moment, I'd like to speak to you."

They took a walk together by a quick-flowing brook. Water tumbled whitely over boulders in the stream bed. The noise would cover the sound of his words quite effectively, since Teagan had things to say that he wanted no one but Alistair to hear.

"Alistair, my brother did you wrong. No. Don't disagree with me. Just hear me out for now. Why he did what he did will always be a mystery to me. When I was young I accepted it, but as time went on I could see that it could not be at all what the King your father had intended for you. I should have taken you into my own household, but Eamon wouldn't have it, and he was my liege lord as well as my brother. I've come to the opinion that he thought he was protecting our nephew Cailan, by making sure you could never be a rival to him. Perhaps he felt he was avenging our sister Rowan as well. I'm not sure. Then, later, when Isolde was so jealous, he felt that sending you to the Chantry was the perfect solution. He was fond of you in his way, but it was the way of a powerful lord with an eye to his own advantage. I know that he told you that your birth would never matter, because you were a bas-

tard, but you and I know that that is not how the world is. Your birth *does* matter, and there are those who might seek to make use of you because of it. I just wanted to let you know how sorry I am at how it all turned out, and how sorry I am that I did not do more to help you."

Alistair shook his head. With a grin, he said, "There's nothing to be sorry about. I hated the Chantry, sure, but I love being a Grey Warden. Hardly anybody knows who my father was. It's not something I go blabbing about."

Teagan looked at him searchingly. "Does Bronwyn Cousland know about it?"

A sheepish blush. "She figured it out on her own. Hey! It was the King's fault! He called me 'brother' when we were leaving Ostagar and she heard him. She agrees that it's something to keep quiet about."

"I am glad to hear it," Teagan said, though his uneasy expression belied his words. "Unfortunately, I know that other people – people who may not have your best interests in mind – also know about it. Since Eamon and Isolde died, I have been going through their papers. Isolde must have written to her family in Orlais about your birth, based on something in some of the letters I've looked at. It could be dangerous for you." He frowned, and grasped Alistair by the forearm. "My brother was involved in all sorts of plots. Some of them were his own affair. Some of them involved the King. Some could cause a great deal of upheaval in this country. Alistair: I want you to promise

me that you will never let yourself be put forward as King. Never: no matter what happens. You must not oppose your brother, and you must not let people use you in order to oppose him. It would be your death." He leaned forward, blue eyes intense. "Promise me!"

Alistair almost mentioned the failed Orlesian plot, but decided against it. It would only worry this decent man. He had escaped the Orlesians, and who else would try to pass him off as anything resembling a Crown Prince? A Clown Prince seemed the best he could manage. He smiled and agreed.

"All right, all right! I promise not to pretend to be King. I promise not to let anybody put a crown on my head... again. Actually, there was this time in Orzammar...well, come on back to the campfire, and we'll have some supper, and I'll tell you all about it!"

Bronwyn's party rode fast on the West Road. Adaia clung to Tara, refusing to show her growing misery and discomfort. She had never been outside the walls of Denerim before. She had never slept on the ground, or in a tent. She had never searched for firewood. She had never seen so many trees. This was supposedly the heritage of the elves, but it seemed odd and alien to her.

Only a few months ago, she had had the wild idea of running away from the Alienage and trying to find the Dalish elves. It would have been hopeless. This world beyond the Alienage was vast and incomprehensible. If she and her

cousin Soris had made it through the city gates, they would have died of hunger and thirst and cold in this terrible wilderness. She was learning, but it was hard. She missed her father. She missed Shianni and all the people of the Alienage who had been her world her entire life long. If it were not for Tara and Zevran, it would be unbearable.

They made camp after a long day's ride. Adaia was led about, first by Zevran, and then by Leliana, but she had no idea what she was doing. The giant growled at her, and the noble lady was patient in the way people were when their patience was sorely tried.

Water was found, a fire was built, and some oats were measured out for porridge. Adaia knew how to make porridge, and tried to make herself useful to Tara.

"Don't people hunt when they live out of doors?" she whispered to Tara. "I mean, isn't that how they find food?"

"Hunting takes a lot of time," Tara explained, feeling like a very experienced adventurer, in comparison to this young neophyte. "We brought food with us so we could find the rest of the Wardens fast."

Adaia had discovered that she was traveling with Grey Wardens. It was like traveling with storybook heroes. At home in the Alienage, their hahren, Valendrian, always spoke well of the Grey Wardens. Adaia had not quite realized that Grey Wardens still existed. Tara was a Grey Warden too, and very nice, even though she was a mage. She was kind enough to share a tent with Adaia and to

arrange the blankets so Adaia would not be cold.

"Since you're new, you get to sleep all night." Tara said, leaving the tent to take her turn standing watch. Adaia sighed, knowing that it was probably because she did not know how to stand watch, and had only a little knife to protect herself with if she saw something dangerous. She hoped she would be useful someday for something other than making porridge.

Night yielded slowly to day. A clear light rose in the east, the first faint glimmer before the dawn. Bronwyn was building up the fire for their breakfast when Scout lifted his head from his paws and rose to his feet, staring into the woods. Bronwyn paused, sifting through her senses. No darkspawn, but there was certainly something moving out of the trees.

"Grey Warden."

She stood up at the low voice. Sten was patrolling the camp, and moved quickly toward the voice, loosening his sword.

The figures moved closer, hands out in the common gesture of peace. Shorter than human, and slender: a man and a woman.

"Everybody up!" Bronwyn ordered quietly.

Leliana emerged from her tent, and look at the newcomers, blue eyes widening.

"Dalish elves!" she murmured, astonished. "I have never met any before."

More rustles. Adaia crept out of Tara's tent, and Zevran stepped out of his, bare-chested, lacing his breeches with an elaborate show of disregard.

Tara stumbled out, dark hair tousled, looking eager. "This is so exciting!"

Zevran only shrugged and laughed to himself. Adaia whispered to him. "They're all right, aren't they? I mean, we're all elves, aren't we?"

He murmured, "You will soon find that that there are elves, and then there are elves, *carina*."

"Have you ever met Dalish elves before?" she asked, watching the two strangely dressed figures come forward.

"Long ago," Zevran admitted, with a little half-smile, "I tried to join them. They called me 'flat ears,' and condescended to try to teach me their ways. I discovered that I missed a comfortable bed, a glass of wine, and the familiar stink of city life. Dalish are very proud and very fierce, and terribly, terribly boring."

"Shh!" Tara hushed them, trying not to grin. "They look very dignified."

Zevran's smile faded completely. "They are savages with delusions of grandeur."

Savages or not, they greeted Bronwyn with chilly dignity. The woman spoke first.

"I am Ineria, and my companion — " she gestured to the male archer at her side — "is Junar. The Keeper of our clan sent us to find you, Grey Warden. Word has come through



the southern forests that you are calling on the ancient allies of your order."

"That is so," Bronwyn assented. "I am the Grey Warden Bronwyn. I was planning on searching for you as soon as the dwarven army arrived at Ostagar. I expected it to be a long and difficult search."

The woman asked harshly. "And why is that? Do you think that the elves would not honor their oaths? Do you deem us of little worth?"

Bronwyn had always heard that the Dalish were difficult and stiff-necked. She would have to tread carefully.

"Not at all," she replied. "However, I have heard of the consummate woodcraft of the Dalish. While the Circle of Magi and the dwarven city are on every map, the Dalish can disappear into the landscape. I could not know if you had heard of my search, or not. That you have found me makes my task far easier. Is it possible to speak to your Keeper?"

"It is," the male archer replied. "She has sent us to bring you to her. She is not far: but one league's journey into the forest."

It was too good an opportunity to miss. The newcomers were invited to join them for breakfast, and Leliana and Sten put together a meal. Bronwyn sensed that it was extremely important that the Dalish not see her treating any elves in her party as servants. The introductions were briefly made:

"My sister Wardens, Tara and Leliana. My friends and companions, Sten, Zevran, and Adaia."

Ineria's eyes narrowed. "Adaia! That is a Dalish name!"



"My grandmother was Dalish," Adaia said shyly. "She passed this down to me..." The girl displayed her little knife of ironbark. The archer raised his brows, and Ineria scowled. She gave Adaia a stern look, as if finding her unworthy of such a weapon, and then turned to Bronwyn without further words to the Alienage elf. Adaia blushed, but could not take her eyes from them... especially from their strange and elaborate facial tattoos.

"We thank you for your courtesy," said the more civil Junar. They sat down, and a stiff and oddly formal breakfast was shared around the campfire. The camp was then rapidly packed up, and they followed the Dalish into the trees, leading their horses.

A short, careful walk, and they saw signs of the Dalish camp.

"Do you see those wagons with the sail-like structures?" Zevran asked the Tara and Adaia, discreetly pointing. "They are called aravels: some people call them landships. Those are the homes of the Dalish as they travel through the world. As you might imagine, most of their lives are spent outdoors."

They emerged into a clearing, where a large camp lay before them, complete with aravels arranged in a defensive array.

"You may leave your horses here," Ineria told Bronwyn brusquely, with a hint of scorn. She turned suspicious eyes on Scout, who stayed close to Bronwyn's side, and gazed up at the elf with winsome innocence.

The Dalish did not keep dogs or use horses, Bronwyn had once read, but instead domesticated the halla, a



TO MEET WITH THE DALISH



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strong but delicate-looking white deer. Halla were revered, and while they pulled the aravels, no elf would describe them as a beast of burden. In addition, they provided the elves with milk and cheese. Not meat, of course. No elf would eat the flesh of a halla, and elves were known to kill humans who were so reckless or arrogant as to do so. Bronwyn hoped they would be allowed to see the halla.

Possibly: possibly not. First she would see the Keeper of the Clan, who was an elderly female mage named Marethari. This important personage awaited them by her aravel. The sides were carved with strange shapes and inhuman heads. Perhaps some of their gods. The Dalish clung to their ancient beliefs, in spite of the Chantry and the Exalted Marches that had driven them from their homeland in the Dales.

Keeper Marethari welcomed them with quiet courtesy. "*Andaran atish'an, Grey Wardens,*"

She wanted something, of course, and told them so directly.

The story was a strange one: of two young elves exploring haunted ruins; monsters; a mysterious mirror. One of the young elves had vanished, the other had been found later, badly injured.

"After some time, it was clear that Danith had somehow been exposed to the Taint. I had been expecting my old friend Duncan to return for some time. He came through in the spring, talking of the massing of the darkspawn. He would be recruiting, he told me, and I knew he wished

to take some of our young people. Time passed, and he did not come. When Danith was found, so damaged, I wished every day for him. Then I heard of the battle in the south, and that he was dead. I almost lost all hope. I believe there is something you can do for Danith, if you will. Come." She paused. "And bring the mage with you. What is your name, cousin?" she inquired of Tara.

Surprised at being addressed, Tara blinked and answered, "Tara, Keeper. Tara Surana, formerly of the Circle of Magi."

"I know of your Circle," the Keeper said with a hint of disapproval. "I am glad to see one of our kin free of it."

Tara's smile bloomed. "Not nearly so glad as I am to be free of it."

Marethari's expression softened. "It is well, then."

The Keeper invited them to enter her aravel. Bronwyn stooped as she climbed into the covered wagon. There was a wide, gauzy curtain at the back. Marethari pulled the curtain aside, revealing a young girl lying immobile on a narrow bed. Her skin was faintly tinged with grey. Watching over her was another Dalish girl, who stared at the Warden with huge green eyes.

"*Atishan!*" she whispered. "You are a Warden! I've never seen one before..."

Marethari said, "This is Merrill, my First. And here is our hunter. I have kept her in a deep sleep for quite some time. It has slowed the progress of the disease, but not cured her."

Bronwyn studied the unconscious girl, feeling the faint-

est thrum in her own blood. Tara must have felt it, too, and she touched Bronwyn's arm, and nodded.

"Yes," Bronwyn said to Marethari, "this is Taint. I have seen it." She had seen it indeed, in the Deep Roads. Ruck's Taint had been more advanced, of course, but it was in this girl as well. She was a very slender, athletic-looking young elf woman. Her limbs were long and muscular, her head shaved for cleanliness. The tattoos on her face traced a butterfly-like shape, refined and delicate.

"Her name is Danith Mahariel, and she is one of our most promising young hunters. Is it too late for her?" Marethari asked, her gaze intense.

Bronwyn paused. What could she say? What did this elf know? More than most, it would seem. Had Duncan told her, or was this lore something known to the Keepers of the Dalish?

She chose her words carefully. "She may still die. And if she does not die, she must leave your people and join us."

Marethari smiled sadly. "I think Duncan would have taken her anyway. If you can save her life, it will be yours, and you will have the gratitude of my clan and all its allies."

Good enough. They could attempt a Joining. If the girl died, Bronwyn would have to talk seriously about the treaties, which did not allow the elves any conditions regarding the life of a single elf.

Tara knelt down to examine the Dalish girl more carefully. "This is an amazing sleep spell."

Marethari regarded the Circle mage with interest. "It is

old magic. A shadow only of the Eternal Dream of ancient Arlathan."

Merrill whispered, "Uthenera..." the word shivered in the air, until the spell was broken by the Keeper.

Marethari turned to Bronwyn. "So you will do it? Shall I awaken her, then?"

"Yes," Bronwyn agreed. "We will need to go somewhere private, however. I shall send Warden Leliana to fetch the proper supplies from my pack."

The Keeper seemed willing enough for Bronwyn to go. She asked Tara to stay, however, to see how the girl Danith was awakened from her enchanted sleep.

Bronwyn found Leliana, sitting in a circle with the others, listening to a Dalish elf recounting a long story of the wicked treachery of humans. Interrupting the elf would only cause trouble. She nearly leaned against a tree, and then wondered if that would be offensive to Dalish customs in some weird way. Instead, she waited politely, inwardly fuming, until the tale was done. Leliana dealt with the accusatory questions that followed the story with great tact, and then saw Bronwyn standing nearby.

"Excuse me," she said to the storyteller. "My commander wishes to speak to me."

Bronwyn led her away a little, and spoke softly. "Emergency Joining. One of the elves is Tainted. I don't know if it will work, but if it does, we'll have the clan's support. If she dies, they may be angry, but if we refuse, they would

be angry anyway. Get the supplies from my pack, and find the nicest silver cup we've got."

Leliana smiled impishly. "I don't think Tara will mind sharing her loot for such an occasion."

Adaia sat in the circle beside Zevran, listening to the hahren tell the story, completely fascinated. These strange elves lived in another world, one that frightened but excited her. How could Zevran think so little of them? She did not mind their pitying looks. Her life in the Alienage was pretty horrible at times. These people did not bow to a monster like Vaughan. They did not beg for coppers, or grub for scraps. Their life was hard, obviously, but they were independent, and beholden to no one.

The hahren actually spoke to her, which made her blush.

"I am told that your grandmother was Dalish. From which clan was she?"

Adaia stammered, "Please, ser, I don't know. My mother died before she could pass on all my grandmother had told her. From south of Denerim, from what I know. Her name was Talanni. I do know that."

"Do not call me 'ser,' the elderly hahren mildly rebuked her. "That is a shemlen title. The name sounds like one in Zathrian's clan. Perhaps your grandmother came from there. And you, cousin," he asked Zevran. "Have you near relations among the Dalish?"

Zevran smiled tightly. "My mother was Dalish. She died

when I was a small child. She fell in love with a city elf in Antiva and went to live with him. Things went badly for her."

There were many sage nods around the campfire. The hahren declared, "As they do when elves live among humans."

Adaia glanced around nervously. She did not want to tell these elves her real name, which was not Dalish at all. She wondered if Lady Bronwyn would be offended by the things the elves were saying. She was talking quietly to Leliana. Sten, the huge Qunari, was sitting at some distance, apparently meditating on his Qun, or something of the sort. Zevran was carefully expressionless, and she sensed, being very alive to the feelings of those around her, that he disapproved of these people.

"Warden Bronwyn," Zevran declared, "is... an honorable woman, and treats her companions equally and fairly. All elves are not the same. All dwarves, I have found, are not the same. It is unreasonable to hold that all humans are the same."

"Did she invite you to join the Wardens?" one elf woman asked sharply.

"She did," Zevran answered shortly. "I refused. It is not for me."

Adaia watched them, to see if the elves would be angry. They did not seem to be. Zevran, she knew, thought a lot of Lady Bronwyn, and it was true that she was a fair-spoken noblewoman, and had treated Adaia herself very well. Still, how could she really trust her, Grey Warden or not? Shems always had their own reasons for doing

things, and generally they were unpleasant reasons.

Bronwyn and Leliana were directed to the west of the camp, where they would be sheltered by overhanging vines. Very carefully, since not just a life, but a great alliance depended on it, Bronwyn mixed the ingredients of the Joining potion. This was the time-consuming procedure that Riordan had shown her. It would be nice to have Tara hurry it along with her magic, but Keeper Marethari wanted to talk to Tara. Anything that would sweeten these difficult people should be encouraged. She had seen Adaaia and Zevran sitting with some elves, apparently exchanging stories. That too, was very nice. Anything to improve relations was desirable.

Her own feelings and prejudices mattered not. Father had had no end of trouble with the Dalish up in Highever. A clan lived in the Coast Mountains, and sometimes migrated across Amaranthine down through the Wending Wood and into the Blackmarsh. They used all their skill to hide when doing so, and for good reason. Rendon Howe considered Dalish Elves to be useless vagrants and no better than thieves, since they hunted and gathered wherever they traveled. He treated them as vermin: raiding them when he could; breaking up their camps and killing those who resisted.

Father had phrased his views more moderately, but had essentially felt the same. There was no doubt that the elves

had been dispossessed by humans, and they certainly had been treated unjustly. However, their refusal to assimilate into normal society – to convert to Andrasteanism and to surrender their mages to the Chantry – made dealings with them fraught with tension. They disregarded property boundaries; they killed game on noble preserves; they were infernally quick to take offense.

Now that she had seen how children were treated at the Circle, Bronwyn could not quite blame the Dalish for hiding their own. If a child of hers were a mage, she might well try to find a way to save them from such a fate. That the Dalish insisted on worshipping their silly heathen gods seemed foolish, since it appeared that those gods did nothing to help them. To be honest, though, the Chantry itself admitted that the Maker had turned his face from his creation and did nothing for anyone either, and would not: not until the Chant of Light was sung in every corner of the world. Considering how satisfied the Qunari seemed to be with their own religion, it did not appear to Bronwyn that the Maker's stipulation would be met any time soon. She decided to concentrate on her potion.

A drop of Archdemon blood. It mixed greasily with that of the darkspawn: black on darkest red, filth on filth. Now, to add the lyrium...

A whiff of the substance rose with the insistent breeze, briefly tingling through all her senses. She stirred with the dragonthorn twig that would afterward be burned

or buried. She swirled the substance in the cup carefully, remembering her own Joining.

"Shall I call Tara and the new recruit to join us?" whispered Leliana.

"Yes. I have almost finished the potion. Nice cup, by the way."

The bard laughed. "I thought you would like it. Such pretty designs. With the deer chasing each other around the rim, I thought it suitable for a Dalish Warden's Joining."

"I hope we'll have a Dalish Warden when it's all over."

"I shall pray to Our Lady Andraste and to the Maker." Leliana stepped out to look for Tara, and then gave her a wave. Tara nodded and waved back. Very gently, the Dalish girl was led to her fate in the little glade among the trees.

"So, we have another Warden," said Tara. "That is something to celebrate."

"And we have the word of Keeper Marethari to provide at least three hundred archers from her clan and her clan's allies," Bronwyn agreed. "That's the real reason we're here, after all."

A new Warden, of course, was a good thing: even if the new Warden had been summarily Joined without much chance to express her own opinion of the matter. Bronwyn had barely been introduced to her before she had been put through the ritual. The girl had survived, which was something of a surprise, considering how sick from the Taint she had been. Perhaps her Keeper was as wise as she made herself out to be. At any rate, they had the beginnings of an

alliance with the Dalish, and another Warden.

Danith Mahariel, like the best of the Dalish, had a reputation as an archer. She was also considered to have considerable skill with a pair of daggers. Bronwyn studied the fine-boned face as the young woman struggled with the horror of her Joining nightmares.

Leliana asked, "Will you go north to find the clan of this Zathrian? From what Keeper Marethari says, his word carries a lot of weight among the Dalish in Ferelden."

"Not yet. We must meet Alistair and the dwarves. Merrill will lead Marethari's clansmen to Ostagar. It's not like I expect her to lose her way."

She needed to get back to Ostagar. Things were happening there that she needed to know about. More to the point, she needed to retain the good will of Teyrn Loghain in her struggle to defend her brother and herself against the Howes and their secret supporters. Should she show him the King's letter? It might enrage him. It might cause a public rift that Ferelden could ill afford in this time of crisis. On the other hand, keeping secret the King's intention to set aside Loghain's daughter in order to marry the Empress of Orlais would certainly be regarded as disloyal on a deeply personal level. She would have to keep her wits about her.

At length, the new Warden's eyes opened: dark blue as a midsummer night. If Danith thought Bronwyn's face an improvement over seeing the Archdemon in the Fade, she did not show it. She accepted her fate with calm stoicism,

like a noble girl accepting an arranged marriage.

The Dalish wanted them to stay, but Bronwyn had to say no to them. Yes, it would be better for their new Warden Danith to have a day or two to bid farewell to her clan, but there was no time. They had already lost a day dealing with the elves. They would resume their journey, riding hard to find Alistair.



For the first time in her life, Danith Mahariel rode on a horse, clinging to the waist of the city elf named Zevran. She had seen horses in passing, but had never dreamed she would actually travel on one herself. The horse was a heavy, slow-witted creature compared to a halla, but it carried them willingly and faithfully. She must learn more about these animals. Her light pack was tied to the horse, and her fine new bow and daggers were strapped to her back. Her clan had been generous with loving farewell gifts.

Zevran's manner of speech was foreign, and he had an insouciant air like that of no elf she had ever met; but his strong and compact body was that of a true elf, and she felt more comfortable holding onto him than she would have been touching the giant who traveled with them, or the tall shemlen women. One, the leader, was quite tall indeed, with eerie green eyes that sized Danith up very coolly.

At first, Danith had thought the woman's face was marked like an elf's with vallaslin: the blood writing of the Dalish. Looking closer, she realized it was a long pale

scar. She was a warrior, certainly: and a Grey Warden. The Keeper had a good opinion of the Grey Wardens. They were an order that did not discriminate among human, elf, or dwarf. In fact, the Keeper had been friends with their former leader, a shemlen male named Duncan. Duncan had died in battle against the darkspawn, and this young woman had assumed command.

There were other elves in their party, which was a pleasant surprise. Not only was there the young mage Tara who had spoken to her kindly, and the handsome, foreign Zevran, but there was also another young girl of the city elves. Adaia was a good name, rolling off the tongue in a pleasantly familiar way. The girl, however, was as helpless and clumsy as a little child. She had lived all her life among shemlens, and did not know how to take care of herself.

The girl, in her strange croaking voice, had shyly told Danith of the beautiful tree in her quarter of the city. A great vhenadahl grew there, which was well and proper, but as she talked of it, it became apparent that that was the only tree she had known there. The thought of a single tree, alone, surrounded by the ugly dwellings of the shemlen and the poor ignorant flat ears, made Danith a little queasy. Adaia was not a Warden, but was traveling with them for her own protection, since she had found herself in trouble with some shemlen bullies in the city.

Tara, the mage, had lived her whole life until recently in the Tower of the Circle of Magi, imprisoned by the

shemlen Chantry. There, she said, elves and humans were treated as equals: but equal in that they were prisoners all alike. Tara had many friends who were shemlens, and did not like to hear the term used of them. One of Tara's good shemlen friends had left the Tower with her. He was a not a lover, she told Danith, but more a brother of the spirit, and now her brother in the Wardens. Tara also thought highly of Bronwyn, their leader, who had saved her from some unspecified danger at the Circle.

Danith did not like the idea of these elves revering a shemlen woman as a protector, since they should be able to protect themselves. However, the world being what it was, it was understandable that they preferred to be patronized by a better sort of shemlen to being killed or even ill-treated by the worst of them. They believed this Bronwyn to be well-meaning, and the Keeper had also believed her to be so. Time would tell. The shemlen woman Andraste had clearly meant well when she had befriended Thane Shartan and freed the elven slaves, but her followers had suppressed that part of her story, and had used her name to destroy the elven homeland and scatter the survivors all over Thedas. Danger could wear many masks, and none more dangerous than the mask of friendship.

The other shemlen female, Leliana, had some redeeming qualities, too. She sang well, in a sweet voice that not even an elf could despise, and she was polite to everyone. She was supposed to be something of an archer, though

Danith would believe that when she saw it for herself.

They stopped to camp at last. The Warden leader set Danith her first task. She was to teach Adaia the ways of the forest: of earth, tree, and stream. She advised Danith to teach the girl Adaia as she would a child of the Dalish, beginning at the very beginning, with skills like finding firewood, and moving quietly through the trees.

Danith took the city girl in hand, and began her lessons at once, showing her the proper way to collect fallen wood, in a way that did not result in poisonous bites from serpents or spiders. Adaia did not know better than to break twigs as she walked, so that had to be addressed. While they worked, Danith spoke: old words, words meant more to comfort herself than to educate such an unpromising pupil.

"The Way of the Dalish is *Vir Tanadahl*, meaning 'Way of Three Trees.' It is made of three parts, which are: *Vir Assan*, The Way of the Arrow, *Vir Bor'Assan*, The Way of the Bow, and *Vir Adahlen*, The Way of the Forest. Repeat those words," she ordered. Adaia stared at her in confusion. With a deep sigh, Danith said, "Vir Tanadahl."

A slight hesitation, "Vir Tanadahl."

"What does it mean?"

"The Way... of the People?"

"No! The Way of Three Trees. Say it, and say what it means."

"Vir Tanadahl. The Way of Three Trees."

"What are the three parts?"

"Er...The Way of the Bow is one, I know..."

It took some time for Adaia to learn those few words, and then they had to go on to the meaning of the three parts:

The Way of the Arrow – *Fly straight and do not waver.*

The Way of the Bow – *Bend but never break.*

The Way of the Forest – *Together we are stronger than the one.*

Tara came up and listened in silence to the lesson. Afterward, she said, "Those aren't bad precepts for Grey Wardens, either."

"Perhaps not," Danith replied coolly. "However, there are other words that are only for our people. This is the Oath of the Dales, from the time when our people were hunted from their second homeland. Listen well, Adaia, and learn it by heart:

"We are the Dalish: keepers of the lost lore, walkers of the lonely path. We are the last elvhen. Never again shall we submit."

The West Road followed the River Drakon as it stretched to the southwest. They had swung wide, avoiding South Reach, since Bronwyn did not want people gossiping about having seen the Girl Warden on the road from Denerim. Likewise, she wished to avoid Lothering and its time-consuming well-wishers.

Half a day's ride from Lothering, however, they found themselves in battle.

They were moving fast, trying to make up time, when Bronwyn shuddered with the familiar tingle of nearby darkspawn. She lifted her hand, and they halted, while

they all swept the horizon for signs of the enemy. It seemed that it was a fairly strong band.

"They have an emissary with them," Tara judged. "Maybe two."

"I agree." Bronwyn bit her lip, wanting to press on, but they had no choice. If there were darkspawn nearby, they had to be dealt with. They found the nearest ramp and left the road, picking their way toward the Southron Hills. They had not gone far when they heard the screams.

They were not soldiers, the mob they saw running for their lives. There were tiny figures among the terrified people, being dragged along or carried or simply knocked aside in the rush. About two dozen refugees were making a break for the West Road. A few among the crowd were armed, and some of these were running back to engage the darkspawn. Further on, half-hidden in the trees and scrub, there were bursts of magic, brilliant and fearsome. The rasping sensation of *Darkspawn! Darkspawn!* Intensified as Bronwyn headed toward the refugees at a gallop.

"Out of my way!" she shouted, hand flung out to direct the scrambling human tide. "The ramp's over there! Get up to the road and turn left. Lothering's not ten miles away!"

She pulled on her reins, and kicked the horse toward the trees, ducking under a low-hanging branch. "Come on!"

"Hold tight, *carina!*" Zevran called out to Danith. "Grip the horse with your legs!"

"What he said!" yelled Tara. She decided that as soon as she saw the darkspawn, she would have to get off the



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horse and fight on foot. She could not wield her staff and hold the reins at the same time. There was no time to let Adaia slide off the horse, and no guarantee she would be safer if she did.

Leliana shrieked a war cry, her bow already in her hands. Sten was thundering past on Trampler, a raging mountain of defiance. He, too, must dismount when he found the enemy, for it was impossible to wield a blade the size of Asala from horseback.

Danith had ridden hallas often enough to know how to stay on. How to fight when mounted was not a skill she possessed. As soon the darkspawn were in sight, she jumped from the horse, landing lightly on booted feet, and threw herself behind some cover. In another second an arrow was nocked and aimed, and she was shooting into the mob of darkspawn.

The horses screamed protests, alarmed at the darkspawn stink. Trampler was not as frightened as the others, and reared up, brandishing heavy hooves in the creatures' faces. One hurlock screamed in agony, and went down, the left side of its skull caved in. The horse landed on its front hooves, and Sten grabbed another of the darkspawn, snapping its neck with his gauntleted hands.

Tara shouted to Adaia. "I've got to get off the horse! Slide down and hide!"

It seemed good advice, and Adaia stumbled from the horse, clutching frantically at her little knife. An arrow



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hummed past her. She shrank down behind a tree. Twenty feet behind her was the Dalish girl, her eyes bright and fixed on the darkspawn. Her bow twanged again.

Everyone but Adaia seemed to know what to do. She felt scared and useless, her insides shrinking up very small at the sight of these unbelievable monsters: nightmare creatures from a cruel fairy-tale. She crouched down behind the tree, her breath coming quick and shallow. Zevran was yelling something, and she glimpsed a bright flash of his sword, and a head bouncing to the ground and rolling.

Ahead of her, Tara's staff was lifted high, and she was shouting strange words. Frost sparkled from the monsters, slowing them down. Another shout and the air rippled with a sudden blow, knocking two of them off their feet.

Leliana was shooting from horseback, not even touching the reins. Somehow her horse also knew what to do, and was circling the darkspawn, curvetting out of their way, dodging and biting, while her rider twisted in the saddle and shot the darkspawn with long, steel-tipped arrows. Adaia wondered if something was on the tips, for the darkspawn stuck by Leliana's missiles suddenly clutched at themselves, and jerked until they fell thrashing to the ground.

Even the big dog knew what to do. He was running beside Bronwyn's horse on the left side, knocking down darkspawn who attacked her there, ripping at them with horrible growls. Adaia could not believe that this was the same dog who had wagged his tail when she had tossed

him a piece of jerky that morning.

Some of the refugees were lying dead on the ground. Some were wounded and bleeding, and calling pitifully for help. Abandoned wagons were tipped on their sides, and wounded oxen lowed dismally. A tiny boy tottered past a dead woman, face red and tear-stained, howling with fear.

Bronwyn saw Adaia and shouted, "Stay down!" She galloped past, leaning out of the saddle, slicing at one of the strangest of the creatures, one who wore a bizarre headdress and carried a mage's staff. A nasty green mist spurting from the staff. Bronwyn spurred her horse out of its path, and then her sword cut the staff in two. The darkspawn uttered a baffled roar, and tried to chase after her. Her horse spun round and her sword sheared through the creature. It coughed blackly, suddenly sat down, and then collapsed to the side, dead. Bronwyn galloped on, and then reached down and plucked the little boy from the ground.

In a flash, the horse was headed toward Adaia's way, and the screaming toddler was dropped next to her. "Look after him!" Bronwyn shouted, and then galloped away, seeing Sten chasing a pair of darkspawn who were dragging a woman behind them.

Adaia stared at the little boy, nonplussed. He whimpered at the sight of her, and she managed a weak smile, pulling him into her arms. "Shhh! We're going to hide from the monsters, and let the heroes save us!"

Bronwyn charged down a shallow hill, sword dripping.

Sten was ahead of her, running with astonishingly speed for all his size and heavy armor. One of the genlocks turned to face the Qunari, and was knocked down and pinned to the ground by the point of Sten's greatsword.

The other genlock was doggedly dragging the woman by a leg. She was bruised and bloody, and appeared to be dead or unconscious: her arms lax, her long dark hair trailing through the dust. Bronwyn picked up speed, judged her moment carefully, and brought her sword down, cutting through the tough left arm of the darkspawn. Tainted blood spurting from the stump, and the mortally wounded creature actually attempted to cross swords with her. Sten smashed it down. He snarled, as he tried to brush the dead hand from the woman's leg, and found the grip too tight. Painstakingly, he broke the darkspawn's fingers, and threw the hand behind him. By now, the darkspawn was dead. The woman did not move. Sten studied her more closely.

"She is alive," he declared. With two fingers to his lips, he blew a shrill whistle. Trampler appeared, and loped after them, stamping briefly as it stopped at his master's side. Sten put the woman over the saddle, and led the horse back toward the road. Bronwyn gave him a nod and turned back to see how the rest of her party had fared.

Another burst of magic to her left. Tara took off on foot, shouting a paralysis spell at a hurlock in her way. The

ground sloped off, and she stumbled, nearly falling. More fighting was going on here. Another emissary was spewing his primitive spells at a black-haired mage. A pile of darkspawn lay dead between them.

"I'm stronger than I look!" shouted the mage. Another spell sucked life from the darkspawn, and a spurt of fire followed, setting the emissary's crude garb on fire.

Tara sent a bolt of lightning at the monster, and ran up to support the other mage. The darkspawn swayed on its feet, uttering a last weak gobble. Tara reversed her staff and knocked the creature down, giving it a kick for good measure.

The mage turned, relieved to be rescued, and then yelled when Tara's fist connected with his nose.

"Bloody hell! What was that for?" He wiped the blood from his face, and looked up, just in time to be hit again. "Wait! *Tara!*"

"Jowan, you bastard!" Tara screamed. "I'm going to kill you!" "Ow!"

Bronwyn rode back toward the hill to find Tara beating not on a darkspawn, but a human mage. He was not fighting back either, but had put up his hands to protect his head. Tara shouted as she clouted him again.

"Do you *know* what I went through because of you? Do you know what the Templars did to me? And you just ran away. Just ran away and saved yourself!" She hit him again. "And now I'm a Grey Warden, and guess what? You're conscripted. Conscripted! Conscripted! *Conscripted!*"

she shrieked. "Don't try to run away this time or I'll hunt you down myself, and our very tall commander will chop you into mincemeat!"

"Tara!" shouted Bronwyn. "Stop larking about with that mage and do what you can to heal the wounded. You!" she called to the stranger. She kicked her horse closer, and stared down at the quailing Jowan. "Whoever you are, this Warden has conscripted you. You will help her in her efforts. You will assist us in rounding up the refugees and protecting them on their way to Lothering, and then you will Join the Wardens."

Tara made a face at Jowan and stalked away, slapping him on the back of the head. "So there! Bastard."

They hurried to heal whom they could, though some were already beyond help. Tara saw Sten walking toward them, leading Trampler, and she began casting spells on the woman draped over the saddle.

"Leliana!" Bronwyn called. "Ride after those people and tell them the darkspawn are dead. They might have wounded or belongings back here. Or a child," she snorted, seeing Adaia comforting the little boy in her arms.

Danith began methodically collecting her arrows. These were not her people, and she had done her duty in slaying darkspawn. It was more important that she not lose her excellent arrows through her own carelessness. Zevran had tied up his horse, and was helping the Qunari right a shemlen wagon. One of the beasts that had pulled it was

dead, and the other was living but bloody. A stranger mage healed the beast quickly, and its dead mate was unbuckled from the harness and the wagon pulled away from it. Another beast – an ox – she remembered it was called, was found alive, and was harnessed in place of the dead one.

What a lot of rubbish the shemlens carried with them! The ground was littered with their possessions. Some of them were already on their feet, picking through the trash, moaning about the things they had lost, while other humans lay dead or injured.

Leliana was leading some the refugees back to help their clansmen. The red-haired Warden was indeed something of an archer, and the feat of shooting from a moving horse was to be respected. Whether the shemlen woman was Danith's equal in a straight match of skill was yet to be determined.

A shemlen male shouted, and rushed down from the road, arms out. He ran at Adaia, and snatched the child from her. "Lorcan! Give him to me!"

He clutched the child, weeping, and without a word of thanks to Adaia for sheltering his son, he walked away. He was looking for his wife, it appeared, and was distraught, but it was still discourteous and ungrateful. Danith grimaced, and resumed her search for the lost arrows.

Bronwyn's temper was beyond frayed by the time the bedraggled little caravan reached the safety of Lothering. She had been hard put to it, resolving the disputes over

ownership of the surviving oxen, over what should be carried in the usable wagons, and over who was to ride in them. The mages burned the dead, humans and darkspawn both, and it was time to be gone, if they were to reach Lothering before dark.

Bronwyn led them out, with Leliana and Tara on either side. Scout trotted happily along, sniffing the air for more of the Tainted ones. Adaia and Jowan walked with them.

"I want him where I can see him," Tara said fiercely, pointing at Jowan. "If he tries to run, I swear I'll paralyze him." She leaned over and spoke to Scout. "You watch him, too. All right?"

Scout agreed with a yip. He did not know the black-haired mage very well yet. He smelled of blood and regret.

"I'm not going to run," Jowan protested wearily. "I've been trying to make up for all I've done. If being a Grey Warden is what you think I should do, I'll do it."

"Enough talk about Warden business," Bronwyn admonished them quietly. "Let's get these people to Lothering, and then be on our way. I don't even want to camp there tonight. They'll find a way to slow us down, and we are out of time."

"No baths at the Manor, then," sighed Leliana.

Bronwyn laughed. "Certainly not! I can't imagine that poor seneschal being happy at the sight of me. Baths at Bann Ceorlic's manor must henceforth be enjoyed only in memory."

"A very nice memory it is. Perhaps the bathing facilities at the Wardens' compound will require similar improvements."

"That sounds like a good idea," Bronwyn agreed. "From

what Alistair told me, they seem a bit primitive."

Sten mounted Trampler, and formed a rear guard with Zevran and Danith. They kept an eye on the landscape on either side of the road, especially where the forest crept up very close. Danith insisted on walking, keeping her bow at the ready. Her clan rarely journeyed on shemlen roads, but they certainly made travel quicker.



The people of Lothing would have made a celebration for them if Bronwyn had let them. Some of the refugees had arrived before the Wardens, and had spread scare stories of the darkspawn horde advancing on Lothing from the east. When the lookouts saw instead a caravan of humans with a rider wearing a winged helmet in the lead, there was an outpouring of relief and gratitude.

Bronwyn refused to stop, telling Ser Bryant that they were in a hurry to rejoin the army marching south to Ostagar. People forced presents on them as they made their triumphal way through the town. Danal rushed out with a tray of tankards from Dane's Refuge, and all the party was refreshed by the ale. Even Danith allowed that this shemlen drink was not bad. Loaves of bread and bags of apples were thrust at them. Flowers strewed their path, and Bronwyn was hit in the face with a thorny bouquet of roses. She caught it and smiled gamely, thanking the giver with a wave. Leliana was delighted by a bunch of fragrant white flowers, given to her from a Chantry sister she knew.

"Thank you! Thank you!" she called. "You remembered! Sister Beatrice, tell the Revered Mother I am a Warden now, and ask her to pray for me. Pray for us all!"

She shouted to Bronwyn over the noise. "Andraste's Grace! These were my mother's favorite flowers. When I smell them, I can almost remember what she looked like!" She pressed the cool white petals to her face, and then smiled radiantly.

The Revered Mother herself appeared on the porch of the Chantry, but Bronwyn only bowed respectfully from horseback as she passed. The refugees they had shepherded joined the crowd in the Commons, and the Wardens climbed the far ramp back to the road.

"Everybody on horseback now," Bronwyn ordered. "Jowan, get up behind Sten. Trampler is strong enough to carry you both. We can't get where we need to be at walking speed. Yes, Danith, I mean you, too. Tara, you said you knew a spell to make horses go faster. We'll need it now."

"You mean Haste?" Jowan asked. "I know that one. I can help."

"Then do it," Bronwyn snapped. "Now."





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CHAPTER 5

LEGENDS OF
THE STONE

OWAN HAD SURVIVED. Bronwyn wondered if there was something about mages and the Joining. Tara might be angry

at her old friend, but Bronwyn sensed that "old friend" trumped "angry." Tara might want to punish him, but she did not want him to die, and she certainly did not want to turn him over to the Templars for summary execution.

He was a mystery to Bronwyn: nothing like the Blood Mages in Mother Mallol's sermons – those powerful, half-demonic beings who had stormed the Golden City and brought sin and suffering to the world. Jowan was gentle-eyed and biddable. His voice was soft, and when stressed he became whiny rather than threatening. Above all, he was a useful mage, and was now a brother Grey Warden.

"The Circle only lets us recruit one mage at a time," Duncan had told her. Due to the Blight, the Knight-Commander and the First-Enchanter had allowed her to walk out of the door of the Circle Tower with two mages in tow. About Morrigan they knew nothing at all. Now there would be



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a fourth mage among her companions, and Bronwyn was extremely pleased. Having seen and experienced for herself how immensely useful mages were in battle, she wished she could recruit a dozen more.

Of course, he would only be useful if the resistance to his presence were not too great. She must not flaunt him in the face of the Chantry. Cullen would be a problem. So, too, to some extent, would Alistair. She would have to find a way to mitigate the tension. Before she could make any decisions, she needed to get back to her people and assess the current situation.

And then she would have to equip Jowan a little more respectably. The sutlers with the army must have a better backpack, and a pair of boots without holes. The mage had a curiously fragile appearance, as if he had not had enough to eat in a long, long time. Bronwyn knew little about the lives of apostates on the run, but she suspected that such was the case. He accepted the bowl of oat porridge cooked with dried fruit from Adaia with fervent thanks – and without even looking at what it was. Any food was a blessing to one who had gone without.

Zevran was being a good sport about sharing a tent. They must get Jowan a tent of his own, too, as soon as possible. With the money she had taken from the Wardens' cache, Bronwyn could provide more fittingly for her people. That would be good for morale.

Tara took her own bowl of porridge and sat down by Jowan.

"How are you dealing with the nightmares?"

Bronwyn listened carefully, not looking their way.

"They're not so bad." Jowan dug into his porridge, and shrugged. "Not as bad as I thought the Harrowing would be. I suppose that's what made me scared enough to run away."

"Not just your dream of spending your life in a country cottage with Lily?" Tara asked, with a sharp edge to her voice.

Jowan kept eating, not looking at anyone. "What happened to her?" he asked softly.

"Taken off to the Aeonar. At least that's what the Knight-Commander said. Whether she was or wasn't I don't know. I was tossed in the dungeon a few minutes later, and I never heard anything about anybody after that." Her face tightened, and she hit him over the head with her silver spoon. "Why did you run off like that, Jowan? Why didn't you take me with you, at least?"

"I thought you were dead!" Jowan burst out. "I thought I'd killed everybody. The spell was more powerful than I imagined. I saw you all fall, and I thought I'd killed you. I was afraid! I ran out the door and I kept running."

"You thought I was dead?"

"I did," he said, his face wretched. "I found out later that I was wrong. There was talk on the roads about an escape and I found out that everybody survived. But at the time I panicked. There was so much blood..."

Bronwyn spoke up. "About the Blood Magic thing. I don't want to see that going on."

"Of course, Warden-Commander," Jowan hurriedly assured her.

"Call me Bronwyn. You're a Warden. I repeat: I do not want to see that going on, unless we're all about to be slaughtered by the darkspawn. Then, if someone were to pull off an impressive feat of magic in order to save our lives, I'd be absolutely fine with it."

Zevran snickered. Leliana was a little shocked, but resigned.

"Intention is very important. That is so true."

Sten was stoically indifferent. "It makes little difference to me. All magic is perilous." He flicked ominous lavender eyes in Jowan's direction.

Jowan nodded, and wolfed down more porridge, glancing up now and then through his lashes to see people's expressions. No one was paying any attention to him at all, which actually was a great relief. Except for the dog. Scout panted happily in his direction, wagging his tail.

"I'll throw the stick some more, I promise," Jowan sighed. "Just as soon as I finish my porridge."

Bronwyn and her companions rode into camp on a rainy afternoon, just before the last of the dwarven troops. These last were expected soon, and everyone enjoyed some much-needed rest before the final push south. Bronwyn made her introductions brief. The additions to the fellowship were met with varying degrees of surprise, interest, and dismay, before they were dismissed to pitch tents and

find the mess wagon. Cullen glared at Jowan, and turned and stalked off, radiating fury.

"You've already got the Dalish to agree to join us?" Alistair looked beyond Bronwyn, blushing a little at the ensnaring vision of Danith in her midriff-baring Dalish armor. "That's... wow... I'm impressed..."

"She is quite beautiful," Bronwyn agreed, good-naturedly. "A fine archer, too. A chance encounter with some darkspawn exposed her to Blight disease. Saving her life with the Joining was all it took to get the agreement of her clan."

Alistair ducked his head. "I wasn't really looking... all right, I was. But I'm really impressed that you got the Dalish to join us so quickly. That should please the King. You said he was interested the Dalish alliance."

"That would be nice," Bronwyn shrugged. She had decided not to tell Alistair all the details of his brother's courtship of Orlais. As few people as possible should know of that. "It was just one clan, really, and their close allies. I've been told of a more important clan to the north. Their Keeper is very influential. At some point we should try to parley with him. Nonetheless, we've got ourselves a sizable force of Dalish scouts and archers, and I'm sure their aid will be welcome."

She needed to say something about the Denerim affair. "We found that Orlesian bard who made trouble for us. She's dead now, but some of her plots might linger on. We should keep our eyes and ears open. I saw my brother in Denerim, too, and warned him. It looks like the woman was feeding false

information to Arl Howe to make it look like my father was a traitor. It doesn't excuse him, of course, but it does explain what he did. Anyway, the woman isn't in the picture anymore. Don't tell anyone that I was in Denerim. All they have to know is that I met with the Dalish."

"I won't say a word," he said earnestly.

She put a hand on his arm. "You've certainly handled the march well. How are the dwarves doing?"

Alistair grinned, lowering his voice. He jerked his head at a dismal-looking group of dwarven soldiery, huddled by their smoky fire, rain dripping from their helmets and beards. "They do better at night than during the day. The sky isn't so empty-looking then, they tell me."

A dwarf sergeant glanced up and saw the cloud-heads looking at him.

"Nobody told us," he growled, "that that Stone-forsaken Maker of yours was going to piss on us!"

Love in the afternoon in her private tent was something Morrigan was learning to enjoy. Anders lazed at her side, fingers running through her dark hair. Morrigan was still considering the new arrivals. "That timid fellow is a blood mage?" Morrigan queried, amused and astonished. "I find that hard to credit."

"True, though," Anders assured her. "He's the one who broke out of the Circle with a spell powerful enough to knock down the Knight-Commander, the First Enchanter,

and all the Templars within fifty yards, And it kept them down while he ran out of the door, commandeered the boat, and rowed to shore. He got away clean. I've never heard of anything like it."

"He doesn't look like a powerful blood mage," Morrigan remarked, peering through the tent opening at the black-haired mage, who was being scolded by Tara, as usual, for some deficiency. "He looks like a clerk."

"That's just his sneaky mageness manifesting itself. He disguises himself as a mild-mannered clerk, and then works his wicked wiles." He gave Morrigan a squeeze. "Have a care for your small clothes!"

They were not the only ones speculating about Jowan. Cullen was appalled that he had been made a Warden, and it took all his ingrained discipline not to smite him on the spot. Every time he saw him.

Alistair saw him glaring, and came over to talk. "I know it's hard, but Bronwyn really thinks he should make up for the wrongs he's done by helping us."

Cullen growled, "He should make up for the wrongs he's done with a sword separating his head from his shoulders! Or in the Aeonar, at the very least!" He shook his head as Alistair opened his mouth. "Yes, I heard Bronwyn. He wouldn't be so useful in the Aeonar. But he's dangerous. Bronwyn is a wonderful leader, but she simply doesn't have experience dealing with Jowan's sort!"

Alistair advised him, "We'll keep an eye on him, all right? If he puts a toe out of line, we'll be waiting."

Cullen nodded, casting a dark look at Jowan, who was diligently pitching Tara's tent for her. "I'll be waiting."

"Tara conscripted him publicly. Bronwyn didn't want her to lose face in front of everyone else by refusing. Of course, he's not all that our fearless leader brought back from her trip for us. What do you think of Danith? Isn't she *strange*?"

Cullen really wanted to watch Jowan, but he answered readily enough. "Strange? Yes, of course. I've never met a Dalish elf before. Naturally Bronwyn allowed her to Join in order to save her life, because she's generous that way, but the woman is a heathen savage."

"Well," Alistair temporized with a smile, "She's Dalish. That's what they are. If she had to let her Join to get the Dalish alliance, then that's understandable. I'm still trying to figure out that other little elf girl she brought along."

Cullen said stiffly, "I sometimes fear that Bronwyn's noble generosity will be her undoing. She trusts too easily. The girl admits she is wanted by the City Guard in Denerim. Tara says —"

"Cullen!" cried Brosca. "I was looking for you! I found a better whetstone..."

Tara called Adaia to join her at mess wagon, and said, "Hurry up and eat! We've got some training planned for you!"

"It's already started," Adaia complaining, rubbing sore

thighs. "My legs *really* hurt from riding."

"Anders can do something for that. He's brilliant. Come on, I'm starving!"

"You're always starving."

After a hearty meal – and Adaia had never seen so much food in one place – there were chores to be done. Everyone joined in, even the shems – even the haughty Dalish elf.

Then Zevran came over, beckoned by Tara. He gave Adaia an elaborate bow, and said, "Carina, the beautiful Tara is concerned that you know how to take care of yourself in the situations that – " he grinned at Tara – "adventurers such as ourselves sometimes cannot avoid." He handed her two short sticks. "Before darkness falls, I am to teach you something of the art of fighting. Come."

He had found a clear space that he thought good for the purpose, and began with showing her some stances and simple moves. Thinking her an absolute beginner, he was surprised that she even knew how to hold the practice daggers correctly.

Studying her with more interest, he smirked. "Someone has taught you a little of this before, yes? You are not so helpless as you think."

Adaia smiled shyly. "My mother taught me a little. I was supposed to keep it secret, so it would not be so hard for my father to find a husband for me."

Zevran laughed aloud, white teeth gleaming. "Foolish fathers! They do not realize that a weapon in a beautiful

woman's hand makes her irresistible!"

Leliana found Bronwyn, and said, "Come and see! Zevran is teaching little Adaia to fight with daggers, and she is learning so quickly!"

They strolled over and saw Zevran teaching her how to block. The girl was painfully thin, but wiry and quick. She had obviously not had much practice, but was at least willing to learn.

The camp was well organized, but the dwarven newcomers had the usual difficulty with adjusting to the open sky. Alistair had been right: as night fell, the problems lessened. The dark blue vault at twilight was not so bewildering. As the stars shone forth, the dwarves enjoyed looking at them, as at jewels glittering in the high roof of a great cavern. Evidently feeling more at ease, one of the dwarven commanders came forward to meet Bronwyn, as she sat with her friends around the Wardens' campfire.

"Lord Ronus Dace, Warden," the dwarf nobleman introduced himself. "A strange place, this surface of yours."

"Well met, Lord Ronus," Bronwyn smiled. She found a bottle of good wine and offered some to him and his officers. This smoothed the way for a pleasant talk by the fire. Scout, at last bored with scrounging treats from the camp followers, trotted over to Bronwyn and put his head on her knee, demanding to have his ears scratched.

Oghren and Brosca came back from a knot of dwarves,



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laughing. Brosca plumped herself down by Cullen and squeezed his arm. Bronwyn smiled to herself, as she wiped an imaginary speck of dust from her armor. She was absurdly proud of this armor. Even Fergus did not own something so fine, though she supposed that would change, in time. Indeed, he would probably go to Master Wade for a new set of plate as soon as possible – though not soon enough for any possible advance on Amaranthine.

"It's so long since we've all been together!" Brosca cried. "I'm so glad you're back, Bronwyn. We all missed you, especially Alistair."

Alistair ducked his head, embarrassed. He caught Astrid's eye, and she gave him an amused look. Encouraged, he grinned back.

"I certainly did!" he admitted frankly. "I was expecting any minute for disaster to strike, and at the very least to lead everyone straight into the Waking Sea!"

"But you didn't," Astrid pointed out, "We're all here, and all well, and so far we've been unopposed. You must have cleared out all the darkspawn when you came through here last. As for bandits – well, not even bandits are fools enough to tangle with a force of this size!"

Bronwyn eyed Astrid with reserved approval. It was clear who had stepped up to assist Alistair in her absence. The dwarf noble was an intelligent person, though she as yet knew little about the surface. Perhaps, in time, she would be someone Bronwyn could rely on more and more.



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"And I wanted to tell you my story!" Brosca told her, diverting her attention. "I thought of a good one."

"Oh, how nice!" Leliana said, "An entertainment!"

More dwarves gathered round at the prospect, and not just Lord Ronus and his honor guard. Brosca's status as a Warden made her a person in their eyes: otherwise they would have turned from her in disgust.

"Well, go on," Bronwyn laughed, gesturing at Brosca to stand. "We're waiting!"

Made a little nervous by such august auditors. Brosca began her story quietly, but then gathered her courage and went on her usual brash, cheerful way.

"Back before she was drunk all the time, my ma used to like stories. She told me a lot of them, and most of them had a moral. That's funny, when you think about it, because Ma has no morals at all! Anyway, I remembered this story, and I thought you'd all like it."

BROSCA'S STORY OF THE NUG AND THE DEEPCALKER

A long time ago, in the great days before the darkspawn overran the dwarven realm, there was a Nug who lived a cozy little pocket of stone in the walls of Kobaliman Thaig. She was an excellent housekeeper, and kept her little lair so tidy that all the other nugs agreed that someday she'd be a wonderful wife and mother.

All the boy nugs wanted to mate with her, but our nug had

dreams and imagination, and she wanted something different. As it happened, she fell in love with a Deepstalker.

The Deepstalker was lean and muscular, unlike the nug boys in the neighborhood, and he had a dangerous air that was very exciting. And he was so sensitive. He brought the Nug presents: sparkling rocks and tasty lichen.

"Stick to your own kind!" wailed her mother. Her aunts and cousins said, "He's no good! Did you see the gang he runs with? Don't you remember what happened to Cousin Fulbi?"

But the Nug cried, "He's different from the rest! You don't know him, so you shouldn't judge him. He's not bad. He's just... misunderstood."

"Listen to your heart, baby," crooned the Deepstalker, when he came to call. "What do those fat old slags know about love?"

So the Nug didn't listen to her mother or her aunts or her cousins. She listened to her heart, and soon she and the Deepstalker were living together in her cozy little nug-hole.

The Nug wanted to cook for him like a good wife should, but the Deepstalker didn't like lichen bread or lichen pudding. He was gone quite a lot, "on business," and he ate out with his gang. For, sad to say, while he was very affectionate with the Nug, he still ran with his old pals.

"They're my friends, baby," said the Deepstalker. "You can't expect me to dump them just like that."

"You don't like my mother to visit," sulked the Nug. "It's not fair."

"Hey, I never said you couldn't go see your mother! I don't bring my pals home, do I? It is fair. This place is just for us. I've never

even told my pals where it is."

So things went, and the Nug was happy most of the time, and thought the Deepstalker was, too.

But over time, things changed. The Deepstalker was gone for longer and longer at a time. "Game's getting thin, baby," he told her. "Look like this thaig's just about hunted out."

She was lonely, and went to visit her mother, but when she looked in her mother's lair, it was deserted. She couldn't find her aunts or her cousins, either, and she went home, very sad.

Finally, the Deepstalker returned, and the Nug was so happy. "Glad to see you, too, baby," the Deepstalker said. "I'm starving!" "I've made a lovely lichen salad," she told him, "I'm sure you'd like it if you tried it."

"I was thinking more about fat, juicy nug. You're looking pretty good, baby."

At first she could not understand what he was saying. Horrified, she backed away. "You told me you loved me!"

Some time later, after the screaming had stopped, he licked his chops and said, "I do, baby. I've always loved nug."

"Yup!" laughed Oghren, "I saw that one coming!"

Lord Ronus unbent sufficiently to say, "My nurse told me that story. Sometimes the simple tales are the best."

"It's... horrible," Cullen finally managed. Brosca's face fell.

Leliana saw it, and defended her. "I think it is a clever fable. Using animals in stories makes them timeless."

Sten approved greatly of the story. "It is a wise lesson in

the dangers of moving out of one's appointed sphere. The foolish nug should have remained in the environment appropriate to her. To mate without regard for her people's customs and laws invited the retribution of Fate."

The dwarves listening generally agreed with the Qunari, since nothing seemed more natural than for castes to remain set in Stone.

Jowan said nothing, but miserably wondered if he had been the Deepstalker to poor Lily's Nug.

"The nug and the deepstalker really had nothing in common," Bronwyn pointed out, "and so their relationship was bound to fail, even if hunger had not precipitated quite such a radical... divorce..."

Alistair and Anders laughed. Even Morrigan smirked.

"Anyway," Bronwyn continued. "it seems to me like one of those situations in which young women are determined to love someone in spite of family disapproval, or even because of it, in order to prove their independence. That often ends badly."

Zevran smiled oddly. "There are all sorts of ways a story like that can end. I knew a man in Antiva who preyed on young girls who came from the country, looking for work. He would flatter them, gain their love and their trust, and before they knew it, they were working in a brothel, addicted to Black Lotus. You might say that he did, in a sense, eat them. Not many survived long there."

"It's a wicked world," Adaia whispered to herself. Jowan,

sitting silently on the edge of the firelight, gave her a brief, sad look of understanding. She smiled timidly back.

"Still," Brosca said cheerfully, "My sister is living with the King, and they seem to be getting on."

Astrid smiled thinly, "I gather that your sister has a clearer idea of who is in charge than the Nug in your story did."

Brosca chuckled and shrugged. "Maybe so."

"It is true that Bhelen may shake things up in Orzammar," Lord Ronus admitted. "He has new ideas. Some of them I agree with, some of them I'll need time to adjust to. But the King's the King."

Grunts of agreement. Bronwyn had her own opinion on that matter, but kept her counsel.

Oghren belched and stretched. "Good story..." He sat up a little straighter. "My turn next."

"Already?" Alistair was surprised. "You've already thought of a story?"

"Haw!" cackled the dwarf. "I got a million of 'em! I could tell you the one about the twin sisters of King Darran — heh-heh — " he saw Bronwyn's raised brows, and hastily added, "...or maybe not. Or the one about the warrior who taught the noblewoman how to make Stone Soup — heh-heh — or maybe not." He tugged on his beard, grinning, and slowly swayed to his feet.

"Yeah, I can stand. See me standing? Got a story for you. There was these three Templars — uh — " He glanced over to see Cullen's narrowed eyes, and Leliana's wary expres-



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sion. "...or maybe not ...Right."

He squared his shoulders. "Political story, then. And historical. Yeah, it's historical. I didn't make it up to insult anybody. Every word of this is true. And when Lord Ronus says the King's the King, think about it."

OGHREN'S STORY OF THE JUSTICE OF KING VALTOR

King Valtor was a evil bastard: everyone knows that. You've heard yourselves how he condemned dwarves to be transformed into golems, cooked alive inside stone casings, white-hot lyrium cascading over their heads. He stole men's wives and daughters, and he stole property and wealth. After years of this, he was so used to having his own way that he couldn't tolerate anyone disobeying his orders, no matter how crazy they were.

And it was not a good idea to criticize him for his drinking, not that it has ever been wise to criticize kings.

Once, when he was so drunk that he vomited into his own soup bowl, one of his warriors told him he needed to stop drinking so much. "You majesty," said he, "Strong drink is the joy of a dwarf, but too much makes the hand clumsy and the wits befuddled."

These words made the king so angry that he had the warrior tied to a chair, and then he called for the warrior's young son to be brought forth.

"Think I'm clumsy, do you? Think I'm befuddled?" he roared. He snatched a bow from a guardsman, and put arrow right into



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the boy's eye. The boy fell down screaming, and died there in front of the king's table.

Valtor turned to the warrior and laughed. "I think I'm doing pretty well." With that he shot the warrior in the throat, and let him die slowly. After that, no one ever told King Valtor that he drank too much.

Another time, it happened that a patrol was in the Deep Roads, and one of the warriors did not return to the city. King Valtor accused one of the other dwarves of killing him and hiding the body.

To the captain of the patrol, he ordered: "Take this man out to the Deep Roads entrance and cut off his head! He's a murderer!"

The captain bowed, and the accused was chained up and dragged out to be executed. When they were at the Deep Roads entrance, who should come limping up but the lost warrior!

The captain was glad that he had survived, and took both men back with him to the Palace, eager to give the King the good news.

The King greeted the men, and then looked at them, while the captain started to get just a little uneasy.

Finally, the King said, "You ought to be dead."

He pointed at the chained warrior, "I condemned you to death, and my orders must always be carried out." Then he pointed at the warrior who had been lost. "And your friend is going to die because of you, so you're a murderer, and thus I condemn you likewise."

Then he turned to the captain, "And you! You refused a direct command! Guards!"

The three men were cut down on the spot. And that was the justice of King Valtor.

There was a stir at the story.

Lord Ronus was carefully unoffended. "We have all heard of King Valtor. It is a lesson to the dwarven people about the importance of choosing our leaders wisely."

"A lesson," Bronwyn said smoothly, "that is important to all peoples, and not just the dwarves. Humans have borne – and thrown off – their share of tyrants."

Lord Ronus, bowed his head, appreciating her tact.

"I can't believe..." Alistair paused, wondering if he was about to say something undiplomatic. He thought again, and asked. "Did he die of old age?"

General laughter from the dwarves. Oghren laughed loudest, but Astrid smiled grimly, and even Lord Ronus was amused.

"No indeed, Warden," Lord Ronus assured him. "He was assassinated by members of those families whom he had wronged. And his end is a lesson to tyrants about how much a warlike people will stand."

Brosca muttered to Cullen, "It sounds to me like they stood for quite a bit."

Astrid came forward, and looked Lord Ronus in the eye. He gave her a slight nod. She was technically non-existent as a dwarf, but she was also a Warden, and therefore deserving of the courtesy shown a distinguished foreigner.

She said, "It's really all a matter of who suffers and who does not. If King Valtor had directed his cruelty only at the

casteless, the poor and the uninfluential, he might well have died in his bed. He grew bold, and he grew careless. No deshyr cared when he forced servitors and warriors from poor houses to be made golems. When he threatened the wealth and power of the noble houses, it was then that his day was done."

"And that is why the deshyrs are the guardians of the dwarven kingdom," Lord Ronus agreed mildly.

"Such as they are," Astrid stood. "I wish to tell a story. It, too, is true."

ASTRID'S STORY OF SIGNY VAREN

Long, long ago, in the days of the Paragon Bemot, Lord Falkor Varen was a powerful deshyr, and few dared cross him. His wife, of the noble house Lantena, had been the most beautiful woman in Orzammar, and Falkor swore he would not settle for less in his second. His children lived in fear of him. The elder was a son, Orm, and the younger was a daughter, Signy.

After his wife's death, Lord Varen paid little attention to his daughter, and allowed her to grow up unheeded by him, cared for by servitors, and guarded by the warriors sworn to his House. This changed when she turned sixteen, when he saw that she was becoming very beautiful: as beautiful as her mother.

It occurred to him that she was the only woman in Orzammar fair enough to be his wife. He decided to take her as his wife, and celebrate the event with a great feast, to which all the deshyrs of



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Orzammar were invited. He commanded that the women of his house devise garments of the finest surface silks for his daughter, but she was to be told nothing of his plans.

To his son, Orm, he did confide his intentions, first telling his son that he should soon have a new mother, and then telling him who that mother would be.

"You cannot mean to do this, Father!" his son protested. "When was it ever heard of in the dwarven kingdom, that a father would take his daughter to wife!"

But Lord Varen struck him, and shouted, "Well, now you have heard of it! Cannot a Head of House do as he wills with those under his hand?"

Orm went to the Shaper of Memories for counsel, but there he found no comfort. No law specifically forbade the marriage of father and daughter, for no one had ever imagined such a thing. Additionally, the law was quite clear about the absolute power of a Head of House. Orm went to the King, hoping for a royal edict that would prevent the marriage, but the King owed money to Lord Varen, and did not think it prudent to offend him.

Thinking his father mad, and this marriage a disgrace, Orm went to his sister, and told her all.

"And you will stand aside while I endure this?" she cried, horrified. "You are a coward!"

"Are you asking me to kill my own father?" Orm burst out in anger. "That I will not do, for such a deed is Stone-cursed. If you want him dead, you must arrange this yourself. Find some loyal man to help you, if you must. I do not want to know about it."



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He left Signy to her fear and sorrow. No longer could she take pleasure in her new garments, for they were to her like the silken web of the spider. She brooded, thinking over what she could do, wondering if when the time came, she would have the courage to use her dagger on her father, or failing that, on herself.

The day before the celebration, a young warrior named Haldan came to her secretly. He told her he pitied her, and if she would pledge herself to him, he would do all he could to save her. He would not have been her first choice, but now he was her only hope. She agreed, and promised herself to him.

Haldan found a cunning apothecary, and from him he purchased a poison of great power. It was a powder made from lyrium sand ground very fine, then mixed with firestone and dried deathroot leaves.

"Sprinkle this on the food of your enemy," said the apothecary, "and it will shred his belly and bowels in short order."

Haldan paid for the poison with a bar of fine gold, and thought it a good bargain. He arranged that he would be the guard standing behind Lord Varen's high seat at the feast. The food would pass by him, and he would poison it then.

The next day, Signy was dressed in her new robes. They shone with the colors of deep-delved jewels: red as ruby, blue as sapphire, purple as the amethyst of the finest water. The hems were embroidered with gold a handspan wide. She was led out to the high-pillared hall of House Varen, where all the deshyrs of Orzammar were gathered, even to the king himself. Beside her father, the Shaper of Memories stood ready to record the marriage.

A rush of whispers and chatter greeted her arrival, for her beauty was indeed remarkable. As her father was her Head of House, he merely declared that he was taking her as wife, and the Shaper in his turn declared that it would be recorded in the memories.

"But I do not consent!" Signy cried, pretending shock and surprise. "This is a great evil, and a dishonor to our house! Surely this can not be."

But it was as if she had said nothing. The whispers and chatter continued, like an draught of foul air in the Deep Roads. She was forced into a chair by her father, and dishes both sweet and savory were brought forth to feast the happy couple. There were great tuns of ale, and precious wines from the sky-lands. Signy touched nothing, saying that she was ill.

Lord Varen, however, ate heartily and well, not noticing the subtle dusting of poisoning on the costly roast boar — or perhaps, as the dish was rare in Orzammar, he merely thought that it was the way it was supposed to taste. Fair women sang and danced and played the string harp, and the feast lasted many hours.

After the feast would come the bedding, but as time passed, Lord Varen felt unwell. He called for more ale to quiet his belly, and held up his gold cup to the beautiful bride, who shrank from him as if he were a hurlock.

"To my lady wife, Signy Varen, the fairest jewel of Orzammar!" He drank, and suddenly screamed out. Blood dripped from his nose, and trickled from his mouth. It spurting from his bowels, dyeing his fine breeches crimson.

Instantly the hall was in an uproar. Those who had said nothing, or

merely gossiped at the wedding were horrified at the sight of at the sight of a deshyr bleeding to death before them. His guards rushed to his aid, but in minutes Lord Falkor Varen had breathed his last.

"Poison! Poison!" cried the guests, and everyone turned accusing eyes on Lady Varen, but the warrior Haldan suddenly shouted, "It was my doing! Mine alone!"

The deshyrs cried out in anger as such treachery, but Haldan declared, "I wished to save the lady his daughter. She knew nothing of my deed. I procured the poison. I sprinkled it on Lord Varen's food. I, and I alone, have done this!"

The king commanded, "Let the traitor be sent to the Deep Roads, weaponless and unarmored, and thus be given to the darkspawn!" And the deshyrs roared their agreement.

A procession of the greatest in Orzammar descended to the barrier doors to the Deep Roads. Vast and heavy, they opened slowly, revealing the dim and dreary halls. The guards tore Haldan's armor from him and cast his weapons aside. Just as they readied themselves to push Haldan through the entrance, Signy Varen, clothed in her silken garments, came to the warrior's side, and spoke.

"This man has done what he has done to protect me! No one else in Orzammar lifted a finger to save me from my father's perverse desire! I pledged myself to Haldan if he would save me from rape and incest. He has kept his word. Now I shall keep mine."

She took Haldan's hand in hers, and together they walked away, into the Deep Roads. Slowly the barrier doors closed behind them, and neither Haldan nor Signy Varen were ever seen again.

Lord Ronus looked at her, frowning. Not angry, clearly, but sad and thoughtful. "A noble tale, and well told."

Astrid bowed, "I thank you, Lord Ronus."

"Very noble for the lady to keep her word," Leliana agreed. "The descriptions of the lady's dress give the story vivid detail, essential to good storytelling. There is a similar story in Orlais — or it at least it begins in a similar way. It is called "Donkey Skin," and it is about a princess whose father wishes to marry her. She, however, puts on a disguise and escapes from him..."

Astrid granted her a dry chuckle. "There is no escape from Orzammar, save by way of the Deep Roads."

"Unless you brave the surface!" Brosca lifted her cup of ale in salute. "Like us!"

"Everybody dies in your stories!" Tara complained to Astrid. "Every one of your stories ended with somebody dying!"

"Of course they do," Astrid looked at her strangely. "Everybody dies. That's life."

"That's true," Oghren agreed. "Death is the only proper way for a story to end."

Alistair protested, "What about 'happily ever after?'"

Morrigan burst out laughing — startlingly like a witch's cackle. "And what comes after the 'happily ever after' is done?" she scoffed. "When the princess is a wrinkled hag, and the hero grey and toothless? Everyone's story ends like everyone else's."

Bronwyn disagreed. "Everyone dies, that's true, but

each person dies his or her own death. Each is different. Death is the end, but it can be met with courage or cowardice, with strength or weakness, in venomous hatred or in loving sacrifice. Death comes to us all, but we can grovel before it, or rise to meet it."

"That is so true!" Cullen cried. He blushed then at his own outburst, and Brosca punched his arm, grinning.

One of guardsmen had been quite struck by the stories, and having had more to drink than he should have, wished to join in.

"Hell, I know a story. 'S a good story. Appropriate, like."

"Shut up, Banak," a comrade said, putting a hand on his arm. "It's time for you to turn in."

"No!"

"Let him tell his story," Bronwyn agreed, hoping it was something more light-hearted than the others.

"It's not fair," Brosca complained. "It's not his turn. It's what's-her-name...Adaia's turn to tell a story."

Adaia, on the edge of the campfire, was struck dumb with horror at the prospect.

"I don't know any stories!"

Tara laughed at her, and patted her back. "It's not as bad as you think," she whispered. "We've been taking turns. You don't have to until you're ready."

"Did you already tell your story?" Adaia whispered back.

"Yes, but I don't mind telling it again. After we turn in, I'll tell you, I promise."

Danith had been repairing arrows, half hidden in the shadows, but she was listening very carefully to all that had gone on before. Would she, too, be expected to tell a tale? It was not a bad way to entertain the company of an evening. What could she tell them that would not cheapen the Dalish? Surely she could do better than this drunkard who was demanding a turn.

The dwarf, ale trickling through his black beard, staggered to the campfire, and then briefly into it.

"Hey!" he protested, half in a stupor, "My boots are getting hot!"

His friend dragged him out of the fire. Lord Ronus' expression promised the man nothing good.

"Get on with it. The Warden-Commander is permitting you the liberty. I advise you not to abuse it."

THE DWARVEN WARRIOR BANAK'S TALE

Anyway, these two warrior caste types were captured by a rival family, and condemned to die. They were chained to a huge granite boulder by their feet, and there was no way to get loose. Trapped, they were. Utterly doomed.

So they knew they were going to die and they started talking, you know, to keep their spirits up before the executioner showed.

"I wish I could be sure we're returned to the Stone when we die," said the first fellow.

"Of course, we're going to be returned to the Stone, you gravel-

brained half-prick," said his friend.

"Well, I don't know. Do you know? Maybe there's nothing. Maybe we just rot and the darkspawn come and eat us and that's that."

"Look," said the first guy. "They said they were going to kill me first, so I'll tell you what: I'll take this cloak pin of mine, and if I know anything after they whack my head off, I'll stick you with it. Then you'll know what to expect."

Well, the executioner came with an axe damned near as big as mine, and he whacked the first guy's head off. Clean off. It flew off and landed in a barrel of mead. Haw! The second guy waited to see if his friend would stick him with the cloak pin, but it just sort of tumbled out of the first guy's hand, so the second guy didn't know what happens after you die until he lost his own head about two minutes later.

So I don't claim to know what happens when you die, and I'll bet my stones none of you know either. And that's the story. Where's my drink?

The dwarf was hustled away by his friends, and there was some scattered laughter.

Cullen was annoyed. "None of that proves that there is nothing after death: only that the body is insensible, and everyone knows that already."

"I liked the part with the head flying into the barrel of mead," Oghren mused. "That's pretty funny."

Zevran nodded, "A vivid detail, essential to good storytelling!" He smirked at Leliana, who sighed loudly.

The final dwarven company arrived, led by the commander of the combined dwarven forces. Lord Piotin Aeducan was a proud warrior, and a cousin of the King. Astrid gave Bronwyn some background information on him.

"My brother Trian called him, 'the horns of the army.' His prowess as a warrior is renowned, and he's nearing the record for decapitations within the Proving Grounds."

"Impressive," Bronwyn said, wondering if an ability as a headsman would translate into a talent for command. Astrid seemed to think well of him, at least.

Kardol and the Legion arrived with Lord Piotin. There were cheerful greetings – as cheerful as possible for the Legion of the Dead – and the united dwarven army readied itself to face the darkspawn with its allies.

They moved out, heading southeast. They avoided the bottleneck at Lothering by following an old Chasind hunting trail until they rejoined the Imperial Highway, five miles south of Lothering,

There they were met by a band of horsemen: knights of South Reach, who had been sent out to make contact with them.

"Teyrn Loghain didn't really expect you until the day after tomorrow, my lady," their leader said, "but he's had us out for the past three days, just in case."

Bronwyn gestured at the long parade of dwarves marching in her train. "I hope the Teyrn has a place to put all the reinforcements!"

"He has, my lady," the knight assured her, "A camp has been arranged for them on the north side of Ostagar. If it pleases you, we can lead you there directly."

"That it does."

There was no great need for haste. Dwarven marching speed covered sufficient ground. Brosca and Oghren were happy to walk. So too was Danith, striding along proudly, ignoring the curious stares.

Ostagar had changed in the months since she left, Bronwyn realized. Cunning minds and deft hands had been at work strengthening the defenses. A deep ditch, lined with abbatis, protected the north approach to the camp. Someone had constructed a strong gate where the Imperial Road entered the site.

And the fortress – for that it now was, beyond question – had been used hard. The ancient stone was pitted and scarred from attack. Remains of pyres old and new blackened the landscape. The most distant must be for the darkspawn, but distant or not, there was a faint reek of them tingling in the air.

Soldiers began crowded along the way, pointing and shouting. A shout went up:

"The Girl Warden!"

Bronwyn smiled, accepting their joy, and making it her own.

"My lord! The dwarven army is not a half-hour distant! The Warden is –"



"I can see them for myself, Sergeant," Loghain grunted. He had been keeping a desultory watch here for the last few days, hoping for the spectacle that now unfolded before him. The Tower of Ishal commanded a view of several miles in all directions. Due north on the Imperial Highway, a little dark serpent crept toward Ostagar. As it moved down from the low hills toward the Ostagar Valley, the snake grew longer and longer, as the thousands of dwarves coming to reinforce them became visible.

At the head of the snake were bright glints of metal. With time, the glints resolved into little moving shapes, and then more clearly into horses and riders leading the dwarven footsoldiers.

From a soft leather case, Loghain produced one of his chief treasures, a little spyglass of Qunari make: a rare wonder that permitted one to see distant things as if they were much closer. The collapsible tube of polished silverite held two pieces of specially ground glass. Loghain held the narrower end to his eye, and looked down at the approaching army. He recognized one small shape near the front as Alistair, remembering the splint mail. The leader must be the girl, from the winged helmet and the casual excellence of the horsemanship. She had found herself some new armor. The little black figure by her horse would be her dog, of course. Loghain smiled faintly. That was a good dog.

There was noise in the Tower: shouts and gossip, and booted feet on the stone stairs, as everyone began rushing



out to greet their allies. Loghain caught Bryland's enthusiastic voice, echoed by Wulffe's deep rumble. Vaughan, newly arrived from Denerim, was calling out indignantly, loudly wanting to know what was happening. Loghain rolled his eyes. The only way to work with a useless prick like Vaughan was to step on him: early and often. Loghain had already begun that task with some relish.

He must go down now, if he wished to meet the girl on her arrival. He had not felt so stirred in years: his heart thudded with pleasurable excitement. Bronwyn's mission had been a brilliant success. In raising the dwarves alone, she had done more to aid him than anyone had in...

His thoughts halted as he hurried down the long and twisting stairs, his guards clearing the way. Their engineers and masons had repaired and furnished the lower chambers of Ishal for the dwarven leaders, and set aside quarters for the Wardens themselves. A great deal had been done to make the campsite to the north livable. Loghain believed their allies would not be displeased.

The ground floor was in chaos, the great door open to the tentative sun. Loghain walked through, breathing deeply, hoping the scattered patches of blue among the lowering clouds was a portent of better days.

Bryland saw him, and waved genially. "A great occasion for us!" "It is."

"Too bad the King isn't here."

Loghain managed a slight, false smile. The King *ought*

to be here. That he was not was something of a relief.

Wulffe joined them, more sedately, and Vaughan puffed up behind, annoyed at being last. Together they strode out to the ramp that would lead the dwarves out to the field set aside for their camp.

Loghain could hardly blame the men for behaving as if it were a holiday. The cheers and clamor increased as the girl in the winged helmet drew near. Soldiers lined the way, waving. She waved back. Most of the Wardens were waving and smiling as well, but for a huge, scowling figure who must be the Qunari; and walking nearby, a slender Dalish archer, who paid no more heed to the cheering human soldiers than she would to tall grass blowing in the wind.

A hawk soared overhead, and fluttered down, back-winging, to light on Bronwyn's shoulder. Another cheer went up, and the girl truly smiled then: smiled as if she would light up all the world with her smiling. She and Alistair looked at each other, a look pregnant with friendship and understanding, and Loghain experienced a sharp, shocking, utterly disgraceful pang of jealousy. It was ridiculous, and he would put it from his mind immediately. Whatever the girl had done on her travels in the past few months was her own business.

Bryland was waving like a madman. Bronwyn looked their way and smiled at her cousin. She saw Loghain, and the smile did not fade, but softened a little, and her hand

lifted in a grave salute. What he felt then was far more than any man of his age had any right to feel.

Rather than making an ass of himself, he simply stepped forward to greet her.

"Welcome back to Ostagar, Warden-Commander. I see you've brought some few thousand of your closest friends with you."



FREYDIS BROSCA, GREY WARDEN

CHAPTER 6

SECRETS
LAID BARE

THE GIRL HAD CHANGED. Months of hardship and command had lent her a new toughness. Loghain might say that her experiences

had aged her. Yes. She did seem older, and that was not necessarily a bad thing. The soft edges were gone, and she was fined down to the essentials.

She seemed aware of it, too: aware of all the changes. There was that brief, stiff moment when he had seen her scarred and altered face, and she had seen his reaction. There followed a sudden hardening of her expression; a defiant lift of her chin; a level stare from those startling green eyes. She bore the marks of her adventures proudly, as she ought to.

Not that any of it made her less desirable. After all, Rowan had borne a scar on her face: a cut on her forehead that had been put there by Loghain himself during a sparring match.

No, Bronwyn might not be the dewy fresh maiden from Highever that Duncan had brought to Ostagar, but she was still herself... only, perhaps, more so. Perhaps... even

better. At least he no longer felt as if he were contemplating robbing the cradle. She was a very engaging young woman, and so many people seemed convinced that she actually wanted him...

The introductions were handled well. The dwarven lords seemed to know their business, and with this influx of soldiers, the army could extend its defensive line. Loghain was concerned that bands of roving darkspawn were flanking them, and pushing past them to the soft underbelly of the Southron Hills. They had much to discuss.

Nor were the dwarven lords been particularly surprised or offended at the absence of Ferelden's king. After all, their own king was far away in Orzammar, consolidating his grip on the throne.

"My lords of Orzammar," Loghain said, "Grey Wardens: you are most welcome. You will be escorted to your quarters, and when you are refreshed, we can talk. I invite you to join us in a feast tonight."

Bronwyn was slightly surprised by this, but caught Loghain's intent look, meant for her eyes only.

He added quietly, "After the feast, Warden-Commander, we shall speak privately."

"My lord."

She was glad enough of a chance to settle in and wash the dust of travel from her face. The Wardens were quickly shown to their quarters in the Tower of Ishal. Space was at

a premium, so these amounted to two fairly spacious rooms, equipped with cots and blankets. In the larger room was a long table, flanked with benches, and with a chair at head and foot. A few folding screens and blankets stretched on ropes would lend some the companions a modicum of privacy. Many now had a chest or trunk, where they stowed keepsakes or booty. The sutlers who had accompanied the army brought these up the endless stairs for them.

Bronwyn herself did not have such item. Traveling light was essential, in her opinion. The old traveling chest she had claimed had been shipped off to the Wardens' Compound months ago. Everything she currently owned fit into two saddlebags and a backpack.

"This isn't bad, Boss!" Brosca exclaimed, happily arranging her little space to her liking. Danith made a face, finding the surroundings cramped, stony, and evil-smelling. How would the shemlens dispose of waste here, or would they have to live in the stink of that, too?

Alistair looked around, shaking his head. "The last time I was here, I was killing darkspawn. I think there were traps in these rooms. Sleeping here is just... weird."

Bronwyn slapped him on the shoulder and laughed. Alistair was still following her around, but his eyes drifted from time to time: now and then to Danith, who was so incredibly exotic; and occasionally to Astrid, who was so sensible and seemed somewhat interested in him. Bronwyn herself had no intention of encouraging him. He was

too much like a brother — and a younger brother at that. It simply felt *wrong* to her.

She glimpsed Jowan, quietly arranging his new belongings. She gave him a brief, encouraging smile, and went into the adjoining room to remind another of her people of something extremely important.

"Cullen!" she said, urging him over to a private corner. "I know you're unhappy with this, but it's very important that you not mention Jowan to anyone outside our own group."

He did look unhappy, but not rebellious. "I know you're confident in your abilities, Bronwyn, but Jowan, even if he means well, is a danger to us all."

"Jowan is a Warden, Cullen. He is *our* responsibility, not the Chantry's."

That he did accept. "I know that telling the Revered Mother about him would make all sorts of trouble for you, Bronwyn. I don't want to do that. I just want us to be safe... or as safe as we can be. We already face such terrible danger, and it's just going to get worse. We don't need all the horrible things a maleficar-turned-abomination could do to us!"

"Jowan is trying to atone, Cullen. You saw for yourself how he put himself in danger, protecting those refugees. Many would have died if it weren't for him."

He nodded, thinking it over seriously. "It's sad, when otherwise decent people give in to temptation. Blood Magic will always tempt him now: always. I'll do my best to see that he doesn't go astray again. And I promise," he

said patiently, "not to talk about him. Are you satisfied?"

He looked so anxious that Bronwyn felt guilty about causing him such conflict. She squeezed his arm. "Yes, I'm satisfied. You're a wonderful Warden, Cullen, and a good friend. It was a lucky day that you joined our company."

That brought a smile to his lips, and he stood a little straighter. As Bronwyn went back to her room, she saw him diligently making up his cot, stretching out the blanket smoothly, tucking in the ends in perfect right-angles. There was something to be said for the disciple of the Templars. Oghren's cot was already a mess, and it had yet to be slept in.

Anders, accustomed to the lack of doors in the Circle, knew a handy enchantment for muting the sound in the little screened cubicle he would share with Morrigan. Whatever went on in there would be inaudible to everyone else. Bronwyn was very pleased about that, and was not the only one. Tara had learned the same charm, and Bronwyn guessed that Zevran might become a frequent visitor to the cot she had chosen in the corner, shielded with blankets. The young elf girl had not entirely recovered from her experiences in the Circle Tower, but was not averse to some gallant attentions, as long as they did not become too pressing.

Other romances were blooming, or failing to bloom. Brosca was still trying to get Cullen to understand how interested she was in him. The ex-Templar had eyes only for Tara, and Tara showed not the slightest interest in him. Bronwyn hoped it did not all end in grief.

She chose the empty cot between Leliana and Danith. Scout, close at her side, stretched out by the cot, panting, interested in the curious odors that lingered in the room. The only thing Bronwyn had to wear to council and feast that was not armor were the spare clothes in her backpack: her shirt, breeches, boots, and Grey Warden tabard. She would take down her hair, brush it thoroughly, and rearrange it. Alistair's gift, the Silver Sword of Mercy, she could wear on the outside of her tabard, rather than under her shirt, as usually did. There was Belarion's emerald ring, which she kept in a little pouch inside her coin purse. It even fit her. That was the extent of Lady Bronwyn Cousland's finery. It hardly mattered. She was not engaging in the blood sport of husband-hunting, anyway.

Leliana was pulling her fine blue gown out of her trunk, and fussing over which of her looted jewels she would wear with it. She was very fond of silver. A dwarven smith had hammered a silver ring into a new shape that could be used to bind the end of the single braid she wore on the left side of her head. She had a silver chain with an ancient silver amulet as a pendant, and another ring, set with a blue topaz. Completing her ensemble was an elegant belt, dyed dark blue. She would be quite the fashionable lady, but Bronwyn supposed there was no rule against female Wardens dressing well. If there was, she planned to ignore it. If she had possessed a gown, she would be slipping into it right now. Perhaps she would find some green silk, now

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that her eyes were that color...

Danith was staring at Leliana, but Bronwyn did not know either the Dalish, or this woman in particular, well enough to guess at what she was thinking. Perhaps she was embarrassed at her own lack of finery, or perhaps she thought Leliana absurd. Bronwyn slipped her Warden tabard over her head. She had given one to Danith on the way to Ostagar, but had no idea what the elf had done with it. After a time, the elf quietly donned shirt, hose, and boots of soft doeskin, and then produced the Warden tabard and put it on. It did not look at all bad.

Astrid, too, was watching Leliana, and her feelings Bronwyn could more easily guess at. The dwarf woman followed Bronwyn's lead, asking gruffly for help getting out of her armor, and then she too wore her best shirt, some rather worn breeches, and her Warden tabard. She asked if she might use Bronwyn's hand mirror, and looked at herself for some time, her face bleak.

She remarked quietly to Bronwyn, "I believe I shall take looting more seriously in future."

Adaia hung back, standing in the shadows, thinking it unwise to wear anything other than her light armor ever again. In armor, sitting with the Wardens – for she knew that Tara would not send her to the servants' table – she might even be taken for a Warden.

Tara had her very pretty dress and bright red shoes; Morrigan, of course, had the splendid green gown Bron-

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wyn had bought for her. They would have to be the grand ladies, and represent their fellowship with honor.

Meanwhile... "Come on, Scout!" Bronwyn called brightly "We'll leave them to it." On the way, she grabbed Alistair, forced him to put on his Warden tabard, and dragged him away to the tortures of a council of war.

The council table was fairly full. There were more faces here than at the council before Bronwyn's maiden battle. Fortunately, all of them were known to her.

Loghain and the arls, of course: gruff Wulffe and cheerful Bryland. Bann Vaughan was here, too, as representative of his father the Arl of Denerim. Bronwyn granted him a nod and a polite smile, but could not forget an awkward encounter many years before, when Vaughan – six years older than she – had grabbed her and kissed her after a salon in Denerim. It was not her first kiss, fortunately, or it might have been her last. He had stuck his tongue in her mouth, and Bronwyn still shuddered, remembering how it had wriggled like a fat worm. She had slapped his face, and Vaughan kept his hands and mouth to himself thereafter.

The dwarven lords and Kardol, the commander of the Legion of the dead, sat together, along with their seconds. Other dwarves were there as well: surface engineers, apparently, whom Loghain respected. Senior Enchanters Uldred and Torrin represented the mages. To Bronwyn's annoyance, Revered Mother Clarine was at this coun-

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cil, accompanied by two smug-faced priests and a pair of Templars. Clarine was the Grand Cleric's right-hand woman, and no doubt anything that went on here would be reported to the Cathedral in Denerim. The number of Chantry personnel at this council was out of all proportion to their numbers in the army, which Bronwyn found particularly galling. She had heard that Loghain, at the beginning of the war, had asked the Grand Cleric for a contingent of her plentiful Templars to fight the darkspawn, and had been refused. Fighting darkspawn was not the mission of the Chantry, he was told. Apparently, telling everyone else how to fight them was.

To her relief, the Chantry group said very little, except among themselves. The meeting was mainly Loghain's exposition of their current situation, the reported movements of the darkspawn, and his planned expanded reconnaissance. No one knew exactly where the darkspawn were coming from, but he had some ideas about that. The dwarves asked some intelligent questions, and the mages reported that their people were all fit and willing.

Bronwyn, when asked, was glad she was able to reply in kind.

"Since leaving Ostagar, my lord, I have succeeded in recruiting additional Wardens. There are now ten Wardens in Ferelden. In addition to the generous help of our dwarven friends —" here she nodded gravely to the dwarves, who returned the nod graciously, "— I have made contact

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with a clan of Dalish elves. They have promised to spread the word among their allied clans. We may expect at least three hundred Dalish archers to make their way to Ostagar within the next two weeks."

This raised a stir of interest and amazement.

Leonas Bryland asked, "You found the Dalish?"

She smiled. "They found me, my lord. They are quite willing to fulfill their obligation to the Wardens. They should prove of use in the scouting operations Teyrn Loghain has outlined. One of my new Wardens, in fact, is Dalish."

The reaction seemed generally quite positive, though the Revered Mother and one of her priests muttered remarks to each other, glancing occasionally at Bronwyn. She thought it incredibly rude, but there was little she could do about it.

By the time everyone had his or her say, it was growing dark, and Loghain's camp seneschal appeared, with the welcome news that dinner was ready and waiting. A plentiful welcoming feast was laid out in the huge chamber on the second floor of the Tower of Ishal. Lord Piotin and Lord Ronus seemed pleased at the variety of surface delicacies. Not everyone was satisfied with the seating arrangements, but with a minimum of grumbling, dinner was served.

Bronwyn found her arm taken by Loghain, and was steered to the chair to his left. It was quite the honor, but she was the Warden-Commander of Ferelden, after all, and ancient tradition granted her status equal to great lords, most especially during the Blight. It was rather

exciting, too. She was close enough to Loghain to feel his warmth and smell his distracting scent of oiled leather, polished metal, high-quality soap, and vigorous male. It was pleasant: very pleasant, but she must not sniff at him like a mabari. The Revered Mother was trying to catch her eye, but Bronwyn looked determinedly at her plate and winecup. It seemed ages since she had a meal. The Revered Mother probably only wanted to know how many of the Wardens were mages. Very fortunately, she saw, only Anders was wearing robes. Jowan had been dressed in the plain clothes of a countryman when she had met him. Now those were covered by a Warden tabard, and his staff was nowhere in sight.

There was a great deal of ale and wine available. Loghain suspected that most of the dwarves would be revoltingly drunk by the end of the evening, but undoubtedly they would not be the only ones.

To his left, the girl was enjoying her dinner. Her manners were too good for her to snatch at the food like a wolf – or like her fellow Wardens, sitting together and laughing uproariously. They were certainly as gluttonous as all the Wardens Loghain had ever known. Bronwyn simply seemed glad of the food, and was paying it due attention. He wondered if she had gone hungry on her travels. It was a good thing for nobles to know what it was to be hungry: it taught them all sorts of lessons.

Bryland and Wulffe were chatting up the dwarves. Wulffe was getting on particularly well with them, for his bluff manner was very like their own. Vaughan seemed to find it a strain to accept anyone not human as his equal. He had bloody well better get over that. Most of the other banns were doing well enough.

More uproarious laughter from the Wardens' table. Some mages and soldiers had turned on the benches to exchange quips and lies. A few of the banns, too. It was an interesting, rather eclectic mix that Bronwyn had brought back with her. He had not missed the polite demeanour of the dwarven lords toward that good-looking dwarf woman who sat next to Alistair. She was a Warden, yes, but obviously Somebody to them.

Loghain asked Bronwyn, "The dwarven Warden with the unmarked face... what is her name?"

Bronwyn glanced over and then spoke, very softly in his ear. Her warm breath tickled him pleasantly. "She goes by the name Astrid, but she is actually Gytha Aeducan, the King's sister. From what I can gather, she was the late King's favorite child, but was outmaneuvered and exiled to the Deep Roads without a trial. She made her way to the Legion of the Dead, and thus is legally dead in Orzammar. She is Lord Piotin's cousin, and he has known her all his life, though he scrupulously addresses her as 'Warden.' She's very competent."

Loghain grunted, glad that she had someone reliable in

her party. And who had no ties to Orlais at all, which was excellent. This was no place to discuss anything confidential, but there was no harm in asking her about the rest of those rowdies she called Wardens.

"The male dwarf?"

"Not actually a Warden yet. He's still thinking it over. His name is Oghren Kondrat, and he's a tremendous warrior."

Loghain regarded her pityingly. "He's a drunk." It was obvious to the meanest intelligence.

Bronwyn frowned at him, and answered him a bit impatiently. "I am perfectly aware of that. In the Deep Roads he had no access to liquor, and he is a *tremendous* warrior. That's all that mattered there. He suffered some personal losses, which led to his drinking; and he feels there's nothing much left for him in Orzammar. I value his service."

This was said so coolly that Loghain dropped the subject, and moved on. "And the loud girl with the tattoos?"

Bronwyn smiled. Brosca saw her looking her way and grinned back, saluting her with an overflowing tankard of ale. "Hey, Boss!"

"That is Freydis Brosca. As you can see, the tattoos indicate that she is one of the casteless. When I found her, she was the prisoner of a vicious criminal. Even weak from starvation she fought brilliantly. She's a cheerful soul, too, and very loyal. Also," Bronwyn lowered her voice again, "Her sister is King Bhelen's favorite concubine... the one who gave him his heir. Thus, she has some royal connec-

tions, though on the wrong side of the blanket."

"Is that why you chose to support Bhelen?" he whispered. She shook her head. "No."

There was obviously more to the story, but he would learn it in due time. "So..." he thought about it. "You were in the Deep Roads. Any particular reason?"

"In order to enforce the treaty with the dwarves, there had to be a king. I had to jump through all sorts of hoops to crown one." She murmured, nodding at the nearby dwarf lords, "Let's not talk about this now." She gestured to a servant for more of the roast venison.

"I see you've learned to eat like a Warden, if nothing else."

She gave him a quick, bitter smile, her strange green eyes glinting oddly. "Wardens are always hungry. I'm no exception."

"Hungry, or simply gluttonous?"

"Hungry," she answered, pointedly taking three more slices of venison. Her smile faded. "Always."

Well, that was one more thing to ask her about when they could speak in private. He leaned in to ask. "Is the red-headed girl the Orlesian?"

"Her mother was Fereldan," Bronwyn said softly, "but yes. She's quite a good archer, and she is now a Warden. However, I do have quite a bit to discuss with you that relates to her. We became a bit... entangled... with her past. You'll find it interesting." She decided to tell him about her other companions. "We can't see all of them, but you know Morrigan, of course,

and the mage sitting beside her is Anders, our Healer."

Loghain frowned at the tall, blond young man who bore a startling resemblance to Alistair, and also to another tall blond man he had known. He scowled, then noticed Bronwyn smiling slyly at him.

"Well, is he?" he asked roughly. "Does he know?"

"He does not. His mother hinted at some secret to his birth but died without divulging it. Besides, he pointed out that since he is a mage, it can mean nothing to him, anyway. He's a brilliant Healer, and we're incredibly lucky to have him in the Wardens."

Loghain glanced briefly at the long silver scar extending to her jaw, wondering how she could call him brilliant, if that was the kind of healing he practiced. She laughed a bit wildly. Perhaps the wine was affecting her a little

"You don't care for my scar? I think he did a extraordinary job, considering that he had to work in the dark of the Deep Roads, and that most of my face was gone at the time. I'm lucky to have a face — or eyes — at all. It was disgusting. I don't care to discuss it while I'm eating."

"As you wish." He knew himself that not much good could come of traveling the Deep Roads. "There is another mage, too, I understand."

She looked down the table. The Revered Mother was chatting with Bryland. "I have two more, actually. We recruited Tara at the Tower. She looks like a dainty little elf, but is actually a ferocious battlemage. I pity the man

who tries to bully her. I also recruited an old friend of hers that we met on the way. He was defending a band of refugees at the time, very competently; despite a timid manner that hangs over him like a pestilential vapor."

The description made Loghain chuckle. "I've seen it in some of the mages you sent us, though one or two have bloomed a bit. There is this ridiculous little girl named Keili, who's constantly casting healing and rejuvenation spells my way..."

Bronwyn laughed out loud, which pleased Loghain a great deal. He said, "You've certainly recruited a great many elves. Is that young woman your Dalish Warden?"

"Yes!" she beamed. "Her name is Danith, and she's also a splendid archer. Her clan was extremely helpful. In addition to their own archers, I also was given the name and location of another Keeper, whom they told me was very influential."

Loghain shook his head, amused. "Perhaps the King might return to see the elves arrive." He saw a curious darkening of Bronwyn's expression as he mentioned the King, and immediately asked, "What? Have you had word of the King? You have. What is it?"

She stared at her plate. "Not now. Really. Not now, my lord." She looked up, assuming a sunny smile to deceive any casual observer. "And that enormous fellow is Sten of the Beresaad, our Qunari ally, who is an army in himself. That is Cullen, a former Templar from the Circle, and you can just see our handsome friend Zevran..." she whispered in his ear, "who is an Antivan Crow hired by

Rendon Howe to assassinate me!"

He whirled on her, wondering if she had lost her mind. She burst out laughing again. "He is! Really and truly! But he decided that he liked me better!"

Bryland looked their way, hearing Bronwyn's laughter. He smirked at Loghain with almost paternal pride, and began sharing a thrilling bit of gossip with the Revered Mother. Bronwyn laughed all the harder, knowing she had already had too much to drink.

She was tired and tipsy, and wanted nothing so much as a good sleep before facing Loghain and his questions, but Bronwyn knew there was no way out of the looming conversation, short of pretending to faint, or drinking herself into incoherence. Neither was likely to do much for her reputation, so she resigned herself to the inevitable.

Most annoying were the grins and raised brows or frowns and scandalized expressions on the faces of her own people, as she accompanied Loghain to his quarters after dinner. The eager whispers made her want to knock some heads together. Loghain, unsurprisingly, was utterly indifferent to gossip, probably because everything that could be said about him had already been said, at some time or other. They climbed the stairs in silence.

"Come in." At least this was simply an office, with no bed in sight. That would have reduced her to gibbering idiocy. The intense awareness of him as a man had not receded.

Her heart was pounding. Her belly warmed with excitement — a most improper excitement. She must keep her mind on her report, and not make a fool of herself.

"Sit." He waved vaguely at a hard wooden chair by the writing table, but did not sit himself. He seemed restless, and in an odd humor.

Loghain, for his part, was in rather an odd humor. He had not missed the general interest in their departure, or the smirks, or the significant looks, or the wide-eyed amazement. What was the matter with people? If Duncan had still been alive and had been told to make a report to him in private, no one would have batted an eyelash.

But of course, Bronwyn was not Duncan: she was the glamorous Girl Warden, and the object of many a young fool's fantasies. And, if he were honest, of many an old fool's as well...

Was Alistair her lover? He had imagined so, but the boy's expression was not that of a jealous rival, but of a shocked and innocent admirer.

He poured wine for them both, and gave her a goblet. He wanted her tongue as loose as possible. Restlessly, he paced back and forth, paying little heed to the cup in his hand.

Bronwyn, for her part, thought that yet another cup of wine was the last thing she needed. She felt odd and nervous, and rather off-balance. In fact, she had not felt so awkward since that ghastly conversation with her mother about men and women and babies. Then she thought about having that conversation with Teyrn Loghain instead of

Mother, and nearly laughed aloud. She hid the treacherous smile behind the cup, and pretended to sip.

The room was no temporary dwelling, as his tent had been. This room spoke of the man: uncluttered and male. Weapons were neatly stored in racks. Armor was oiled, polished, and hung on stands of the correct size. Dominating the room was a big writing table, arranged by a methodical hand, displaying items of good but not garish quality: a pitcher of wine, and goblets of chased silver, probably a gift; maps and notebooks; a small carved chest for private papers; fine writing and drawing tools, including a splendid bronze inkstand. The chair behind the table looked comfortable. The chairs in front of the table were markedly less so: discouraging idle visitors from lingering.

He paused in his pacing, and fixed her with a probing stare. "You've been a busy girl, Warden. Mages, Dwarves, and now the Dalish. You've done well."

She tried to think of an answer that was witty, or at least not insipid, and failed. He made her too nervous. "Thank you, my lord," she simply said. She hoped she would not spill her wine or drop the cup.

"I was astonished that in the midst of your journeys, you yet found time to visit Orlais."

Of course he would know. The commander of Gherlen's Halt must have told him.

"Yes," she answered easily. "I crossed the border to send a message to the Senior Warden of Jader, who had offered

his assistance to me. Warden Riordan answered all my questions, and greatly aided my mission."

He pounced. "And why would you need an Orlesian to enforce the treaties with the allies that you assured me would be anything but Orlesian?"

She should have known that the first word out of his mouth would be "Orlais." She took care to make her response as reasoned and calm as possible.

"I did not, my lord. Enforcing the treaties is not my only mission. Rebuilding the Grey Wardens in Ferelden was not possible without the assistance of a Senior Warden, well-versed in all the lore and secrets of the Order."

"But you've been recruiting so very energetically," he said, the faintest hint of mockery in his voice. "A pair of mages here, a trio-forgive me – another pair of dwarves there. Elves and ex-Templars and Orlesian bards. Such an interesting company, loyal to you, I daresay."

"They have given me every proof of such loyalty," she answered, wondering where this was going. Was he going to accuse her of building a private army? If so, she was going to laugh in his face at the idea of such a paltry force being any threat to Ferelden – or to him personally. She added, "I needed information from the Senior Warden. Simply calling a recruit a Warden does not make him one."

There it was, the first Warden secret, dropped for him to pick up and examine, if he wished.

He did. "The Wardens have always guarded their secrets

closely.”

He was trying to catch her out, which annoyed her. She had already chosen her course, and had not the least desire to play silly games.

“You do not need to trick or cozen the secrets from me, my lord. I came to Ostagar with every intention of sharing them with you.”

That stopped him. He paused, startled and wary. This was too easy. “Just like that?”

“Yes. Just like that, my lord. There are things you ought to know. And I have it on good authority that heads of state are routinely entrusted with the Wardens’ secrets. As you have been the *de facto* ruler of Ferelden for thirty years, I think it’s time you were told these things. And they are nothing that the Empress of Orlais does not already know. I am not sure Duncan told King Cailan all of them, based on some of the things the King has said and done. Perhaps Duncan was shielding him on account of his youth.”

There was a certain flatness to her voice. Duncan might have wished to shield the King, but no one had shielded her.

“The Empress... knows...”

“She knows everything, my lord. She knows about the Wardens. How they are made, about their special abilities, about the things they sacrifice to be Wardens. Above all, she knows why only Wardens can slay the Archdemon. That was perhaps why she has not been particularly generous with the Wardens of her own country while

Ferelden is threatened by a Blight.”

“Do you believe what this Riordan told you? Might he not be trying to deceive you for purposes of his own?”

Bronwyn thought it over. It would not do to be credulous. “I do believe him, my lord, and not just because he seemed trustworthy. The Wardens, whatever you might think, are not an Orlesian order. There are Wardens in every country in Thedas. If Riordan were to give me false information, that would be all too easily revealed by the Antivan Wardens, or the Wardens of the Free Marches. Furthermore, the historical record, if examined, supports Riordan’s claims. Yes, I believe what he told me, if only because it is so extremely unpleasant.”

Loghain nodded. She had thought it through, at least. Was she in contact with Antiva and the Free Marches? She had family connections in both places.

“At any rate, my lord, on to the Warden ‘secrets.’ I shall begin at the beginning.” She took another sip of wine. “I am not certain that you noticed, as you were extremely busy just before the Battle of Ostagar — ”

“ — The *first* Battle of Ostagar,” he put in, rather dryly. There had been a dozen more battles since she left.

“ — As you say, my lord. I am not certain you noticed at that time that I was not Duncan’s only recruit.”

He frowned. “I knew there were others. I presumed them killed in the battle.” She was staring at him with those strange green eyes. They were quite distracting. Not

unattractive, mind you, but *different*.

"Not so, my lord. They did not live long enough to see it. They perished during the Joining ritual. Many do. I am told it is often fatal."

He really had had no idea. Duncan had recruited so few... "An ordeal of some sort? A duel to prove your worth?"

"Not a duel. I suppose you could call it an ordeal, but it is the thing that transforms us into Wardens. A great many words are spoken, but what it really comes down to," she took a deep breath—"is drinking a potion, of which the principal ingredient is darkspawn blood."

A silence. Loghain's eyes widened, and he began hastily to rearrange some opinions. "Darkspawn blood is deadly poison, even to the touch. To drink it —"

"The potion has some other essential ingredients. It took thousands of lives before a compound was discovered that did not simply kill or turn those who drank it into mindless ghouls. But yes, it is indeed deadly poison. The Joining potion kills many who drink it outright, hence Duncan's wariness about recruiting people whose loved ones might wish to come looking for them later."

"But you survived."

"For now. Darkspawn blood is always fatal. Always. Either one dies immediately and horribly, or one becomes a Warden. After some decades, I am told — thirty years on average — the poison finally takes hold, and the Warden begins to deteriorate. We experience something known as

the Calling. We go off to the Deep Roads to die in a last battle against the darkspawn — and also to spare the surface the distressing sight of Wardens turning into ghouls."

Loghain stared at her, utterly horrified. It was a form of Blood Magic: a cruel, shocking form. How was such a horror permitted to exist? Other heads of state knew of this?

"If the Divine knew about this —"

Bronwyn smiled sourly. "She knows. So does the Black Divine in Minrathous. They know it and they tolerate it because of the reasons that this is done. The First Blight destroyed the Tevinter Empire: shattered it so thoroughly that an invasions of barbarians led by the Prophet Andraste could sweep up to the gates of the imperial city itself. The Tevinter legions were vast, and had seemed irresistible: their magisters had magic of inconceivable power. All of it was vain against the Blight."

"Until the coming of the Wardens."

"Until then," she agreed, firelight glinting into her green eyes. "although you might as well say, until the *creation* of the Wardens." She took another sip of wine. Speaking all this aloud, so long held within her like a lump of unworked lead, was tiring. "Make no mistake, my lord: we were created. Thousands of people died hideously in failed experiments to create a being that could kill the Archdemon. The formula of the Joining potion is generally not entrusted to Junior Wardens. Neither Alistair nor I knew how to make more Wardens until Riordan taught us the formula and supervised the

Joining of our first new recruits. And that is the matter – the great matter – that I am coming to.”

He sat down, facing her, fingers interlaced, his blue gaze intent on her green one.

“Then let us have it.”

“Very well,” She paused, looking for right words, the clear, eloquent words that would satisfy this man.

“The Archdemon,” she began, “is not simply a dragon. If it were a simply a dragon, it could be killed like any other beast, however powerful. After all, the Nevarran dragon hunters nearly drove such creatures to extinction only a few generations ago. No. The Archdemon is a god. An Old God, perhaps, but a god all the same.” She laughed bitterly. “If the Revered Mother were eavesdropping on us now, no doubt she would squawk in outrage, and correct me, saying that the creatures the Tevinters worshiped were false gods, and no better than demons, but we are not children, my lord, and no one is listening. The Chantry itself teaches that the Maker has turned his face from us, and has no interest in our doings. I can assure you that the Archdemon is quite godlike enough to threaten us, and it is very interested in us indeed.”

“You claimed to have seen it in the Deep Roads.”

Offended, she stared at him a little longer. “I saw it in the Deep Roads – and elsewhere. Even were it a mindless beast, it would be very, very dangerous, and very hard to kill. Which brings me back, once again, to the Wardens, and

why we are not so irrelevant as you might believe us to be.”

She took a moment to fight down the rising anger. It irritated her beyond words that this man should be questioning her like a criminal. After all she had done – after nearly dying in the filthy Deep Roads – she felt she deserved better.

But of course he knew nothing about that. She bit her lip, forced herself to stay on task, and continued. “The Joining makes Wardens immune to the Taint. Perhaps you know this – or something of it. It also gives us other powers. The Taint in us gives us a link to the darkspawn. We can sense them. And they can sense us.”

He straightened, making a connection. “That is how the darkspawn were able to target the Grey Wardens so quickly.”

She nodded, not saying anything for a moment, remembering the horror of that battle. Finally, she sighed, and said, “As you say. It is a double-edged sword. I have heard that some older Wardens, after long experience, claim that they can hear the darkspawn, after a fashion, or at least comprehend the commands the Archdemon is giving to its mindless minions. I have sensed nothing from the Archdemon other than raw emotions, such as rage and hatred, but it may be so. I have not been a Warden all that long.”

He watched her carefully. She believed what she was saying, he was certain. Some of it might even be true. The Warden lore made sense.

She went on: “The crux of the issue, of course, is our ability to slay the Archdemon. The Tevinters could slay the Old

God in its dragon form, but the spirit of the Old God lived on, and followed the pull of the Taint to the body of one of the other darkspawn, and when that was slain, into yet another, and so on, and so on... After a time, the Archdemon simply rose again. And again. It is hard to imagine the terror those ancient folk must have experienced."

She sipped from her cup, and thought for a moment. "Here it is: because of the Taint in us, when a Warden slays the Archdemon, it stays dead. The essence of the Archdemon, freed from its dragon form, follows the Taint into the Warden. Since a Warden is not a soulless vessel – unlike the darkspawn – the Old God's essence collides with the soul of the Warden, destroying them both. That is why, if you make a study of the matter, you will find that every Warden who slew an Archdemon died in the act of doing so."

"The Grey Warden who slays the Archdemon... dies?"

"Exactly so. There is no other way. It also explains why the Wardens closed in on the Archdemon, not allowing others an opportunity to bring disaster down upon everyone by making a 'lucky' shot, for example. Others joined in the fight, but at the end, it needed to be Wardens, and only Wardens, lest the Archdemon rise again."

Loghain was still wrapping his head around the sentence of death that the girl was under. Either immediate death – and complete destruction, if she were to be the one to strike the killing blow; or to have only thirty years before a miserable, lonely death. She would never

live to see his own age. It was cruel and unfair, but mortal life was like that. Still, thirty years was thirty years, and many did not live that long anyway. What mattered was to make the most of the time one had.

He said, "I will indeed make a study of this. There should be some sort of loophole in this. There always seems to be. I can see why you would want to have quite a few Wardens, certainly."

"I am hoping to learn more from the Grey Warden texts about killing dragons. There don't seem to be a great many live ones to practice upon."

He frowned, shaking his head. "I remember seeing one in the Wilds at the end of the war, It was the only one, though. And they fly, of course. Have you given thought to how you will fight a flying creature, now that the Wardens no longer have griffons? Or am I mistaken in that? Do the Wardens have a secret paddock of griffons hidden away in the Anderfels?"

Bronwyn scowled at him. "If they do, they are not inclined to share them. I shall have to rely on the fact that the Archdemon will be drawn to us by the Taint. The problem, as I see it, is not so much bringing it down upon us, as it is keeping it down."

"Ballistae could be used to damage or cripple it. I've had some dwarven engineers working on the problem."

She looked up at that, interested. "Have you indeed, my lord? I should like to talk to them at length."

He nodded, his mind already on the next issue. "What

about the King? Do you plan to share your secrets with him?"

She really was unsure about that. Could the King be trusted? She temporized.

"The King is not here, my lord. He is in Denerim, recovering from wounds, as I understand it."

Loghain snorted. "I had thought he might return for your triumphal procession with the dwarves, but there are political concerns that keep him in the capital. He has called for a Landsmeet. Did you know?"

"I had heard that, my lord," Bronwyn said carefully. "In order to call Arl Howe to account for his crimes."

"Yes. Well." He opened his box of correspondence and held the accusatory letters in a moment of contemplation.

Why not? Let us see if the Girl Warden, who has an answer for everything else, has an answer for this.

"Arl Howe feels that he was more than justified in his actions. He has sent me documents supporting his claim that the Teyrn of Highever and his wife were guilty of treason and espionage." He slapped letters down on the polished writing table, and gave her a level, challenging stare.

Bronwyn stared back, utterly taken aback at the accusation. She had imagined they were getting on, that they were talking as equals – or nearly. She had imagined that he returned her feelings for him... a little. She had imagined that he respected her for her achievements, and was grateful for her sacrifice. She had entrusted him with her deepest secrets. The magnitude of her folly was before her, and rage

rose up to choke her, like an inky black wave of Taint.

Unable to speak at first, she rose slowly from her chair, her eyes on Loghain. She would not lose control before this man, self-satisfied in his power, throwing her confidence in him back in her face with this studied insult. She would not –

Anger slipped its leash. She hissed in rage and threw her goblet in Loghain's face, the wine spattering the room like blood.

"How *dare* you!" she shouted.

Startled, he knocked the cup aside with his arm, and took an angry breath himself. With a scrape and a silvery clang, the cup fell to the stone floor, spinning crazily. Before Loghain could say a word, Bronwyn was in his face, all her terrors and miseries pouring out in a scalding torrent.

"I have gone to the limits of the Deep Roads for this country, and you repay me with suspicion and contempt! Let your *friend* Arl Howe find troops for you, if you find me so unworthy!"

"I did not say I found you unworthy!" He shouted back. "Don't put words in my mouth!"

Unheeding, she stalked to the table, and furiously swept off everything on it, letters, maps, parchment, ink stand, and all. The ink ran over the floor and the parchment swirled down, settling gently. Loghain, furious himself, grabbed her by her shoulder, and whirled her around. She twisted out of his grasp, and stepped back, her fists clenched to fight.

"Don't you dare to put your hands on me!" she snarled. "I

won't endure such insults from you or any man! And Arl Howe is a fool, and a coward, and a bastard, and a snake, and the dupe of the Orlesians! And he hides in his castle like a filthy spider in his web while the rest of Ferelden fights for its life! I am personally going to rip his tongue from his lying mouth, and I cannot believe that you would credit his feeble, half-witted slanders, but for the fact that I know that all he had to do was write the word 'Orlesian' and you would believe the worst of *anyone!*"

He slammed his own cup down on the table, and roared, "Hold your tongue!"

She should, she should, she really should, but it felt so good to release all this pent-up wrath...

"I will not! You dare to call my parents traitors, knowing them dead and unable to defend themselves! You call them traitors to my very face – "

"I never called your parents traitors!" he shot back. "I said that *Arl Howe* said he had evidence, which he sent me!"

The door creaked open, and a trio of guards peered in nervously. "My lord," one ventured, "is everything all – "
 "Get out!" Loghain bellowed. The door slammed shut.

Trying to pull the pieces of herself together, Bronwyn lowered her voice and growled, "His evidence is rubbish: a forgery concocted to make him believe what he wished to believe. I'm willing to wager what coin I have left that he only sent you copies."

He loomed over her, eyes narrowed. Bronwyn gulped,

remembering at whom she was ranting. She would not flinch, not even were he Korth the Mountain Father himself.

"It is understandable," he ground out, "that you would defend your family, regardless of their innocence... or guilt. These papers contain a letter in which your father offers his allegiance to Empress Celene in exchange for the name of King of Ferelden."

"Rubbish!" she exploded. "Absolute rubbish! How dare you accuse my family of treason! I suggest you look to your own, before you speak against the Couslands!"

"What do you mean?" he asked, his voice lashing her like a whip.

Too angry for half-measures, she shouted. "You want to see something treasonous? I'll show you who's a traitor to Ferelden! You wait here! Wait right here and I'll show you something to make the blood freeze in your veins. Don't move a muscle!"

She rushed from the room, slamming the door open. The unfortunate guards, trying to eavesdrop, were knocked down. She roared, "Out of my way!" nearly tripping over them.

Loghain followed her to the doorway, seeing the back of her as she raced for the stairs, and ran up them still raving to herself.

His blood was up. The girl had behaved inexcusably. Who did the chit think she was?

He glared at the unfortunate guards. "Idiots," he muttered.

"Sorry, my lord," they muttered sheepishly.

That could have gone better, he admitted to himself. It was not at all the reaction he had expected.

I suppose I thought that she would protest their innocence with wide and wounded eyes. Perhaps even cry. Possibly that I would have to comfort her. I really had no idea she had such a temper. I've haven't been shouted at like that since Anora was a teenager.

More gapers were arriving to witness the drama, but the girl was ahead of them, pounding down the stairs, parchment in her hand, green eyes blazing. She saw him waiting, and stalked toward him, shaking the parchment like a deadly weapon. Perhaps it was. It must be something he was not going to like.

She strode through the doorway, slamming the door behind her, and proceeded to slap the parchment onto the table, just as he had done.

"All right! Read that! And *that's* the original and no forgery, for I took it from the courier herself!"

Warily, with a glance at the girl to ascertain whether she meant to throw anything else at him, he picked up the parchment. And then he recognized the broken seal, dread pooling in his gut.

Cailan, what have you done?

"This is royal correspondence," he growled ominously. "What are you doing interfering with it?"

"Go on, read it!" she insisted. "I *dare* you to tell me after-

wards that you're sorry it was intercepted!"

He did read it, his rage and fear growing with every paragraph; for each sentence was a knife in his back, a betrayal of Anora, and a mortal blow to Ferelden. He had known that there were treacherous leeches among the Bannorn who wanted to replace Anora with a queen of their choice... but this...

It was not a forgery. He knew the hand of Cailan's private secretary too well. And he knew Cailan's hand from the day the boy had started learning his letters. Not only his signature was there, but little notes to some of the paragraphs. This was real: Cailan meant to turn his country over to the Empress in exchange for the name of Emperor. It was the most genuinely horrifying document that Loghain had ever read.

He read it again, standing by the window. He moved to his chair and read it again. Bronwyn leaned against the wall, watching him, her blood calming, her temper cooling, regrets and shame surfacing.

She had not meant to give him this. Or at least not the way she had: out of anger and spite. It must alarm and horrify him. On a human level, it must grieve him deeply. This was his best friend's son: the husband of his only child.

"How did you lay your hands on this?" he growled at her, more suspicious than ever.

"How?" she exhaled deeply, and told him. "Six days ago I was in Denerim."

Loghain was quite the master of the frown. Bronwyn reminded herself that she had looked darkspawn in the eye. Loghain was only a man. A powerful man, certainly, but he was not as terrible as a Broodmother, or as dangerous as a demon.

"Why were you there?" he asked in a hard, cold voice.

"Because the Crows and Arl Howe weren't the only people trying to kill me. Between Orzammar and Gherlen's Halt, my party was set upon by some very skilled and professional people. We discovered they were after us due to Leliana – the half-Orlesian archer. Her old associates were afraid she would reveal what she knew about them."

"And had she?"

Bronwyn snorted, "No. I wish! She had spent the last two years atoning for her sins in the Lothering Chantry, and had largely put them out of her mind. They had not forgotten her, however, so I discovered that she had been quite the naughty girl prior to serving Andraste." She was breathing more slowly now, though she was still angry and disappointed. "She was the cast-off apprentice of an Orlesian bard who lived in Denerim." She smirked at the look of anger and alarm on Loghain's face. "I say 'lived,' because six days ago I killed that bitch and all her henchmen. Her name was Marjolaine, and it was she who was the King's secret contact with Orlais. Of even greater personal interest to me, it was she who turned the Arl of Amaranthine's wits the seamy side without, and made him think his best friend was a traitor!"

Naturally, Loghain wanted to hear every detail about the woman. Bronwyn looked at him a moment, and thought about what she cared to tell him. An hour ago, she would have told him all.

That her own father had approached the King about a Cousland marriage, Bronwyn decided was simply none of Loghain's business. She possessed the original of that letter, and would take care that no one else ever saw it. She had kept it, indeed, because she had nothing else of her father's at the moment, and because he spoke so lovingly of her in it. Loghain would never touch it, or scoff at it, or scowl over it. She continued with her carefully edited tale.

"After Leliana told me that the men sent to kill us had come from this woman Marjolaine, I knew I would have to do something about her. She had attempted to interfere with Wardens in the course of a Blight, and that could not stand. In addition, Leliana told me that this Marjolaine had been a confederate of the late Harwen Raleigh –"

Loghain glanced up at this, very interested and intent. "I suspected that Raleigh was disaffected. Maric should not have cast him off so completely, but that's all blood under the bridge now."

"As you say," Bronwyn agreed. "At any rate, Raleigh was one of Marjolaine's useful sources of intelligence about Ferelden, but she had obviously been very active for some time. If someone wished to communicate with the Empress through other than the approved diplomatic channels, she was the person to see."

"And Cailan... saw her."

"Leliana knew where she lived in Denerim. We disguised ourselves and watched the house. Late one night, a messenger claiming to be from the Palace knocked on the door and demanded that she accompany him there. After she and some of her guards had left, we gained access to the house and awaited her return. When she came back, we had a talk. She had just obtained the document before you."

"Was it absolutely necessary to kill her?" he asked, irritated. "Surely it would have been better to turn her over to more experienced interrogators."

"As I was in Denerim incognito, and was in a hurry to return to the main party – yes, it was necessary to kill her. I am hoping that since she had that remarkable document, no one will be concerned about her absence for weeks – perhaps months. The King no doubt thinks her on her way to Val Royeaux. The Empress might not be expecting her any time very soon."

"No one's going to find the body?"

She regarded him grimly. "No."

He grunted at that, looking at her sharply. She was a very different girl now than the one who had left Ostagar a few months ago. "Did she say she had dealings with Howe?"

Bronwyn looked strained. "She was so very smug about how easy it was to make Arl Howe believe what he wanted to believe. She recognized me, and assured me that the murder of my family was not a personal matter for her,

but merely part of the Great Game. Yes, at that moment I found it necessary to kill her."

"How do you intend to disprove Arl Howe's evidence?"

"What evidence?" she asked, her voice rich with contempt. "Those papers of yours could be written by anyone. I see no reason even to read them, since I know them to be invented out of whole cloth by that vicious bard. Margolaine was something of a forger, but let Arl Howe come forward with his falsehoods. Either I or my brother stand ready to prove him a liar in trial by combat. He knows this, which gives him even more reason to send the Crows after us. They attacked Fergus when I was in Denerim, but luckily I was there at the time. We killed them all. Fergus knows to take serious precautions now."

Loghain brooded a little longer, and shook his head. "No doubt Rendon Howe seems important to you, but you must see that I look upon the King's treachery as a far greater danger to the nation. He is planning to cast my daughter – his wife – aside, and unite us with our ancient enemy." His voice grew sarcastic. "How he plans to do that is a matter of some concern to me, if you will forgive me for saying so."

She answered sharply. "Obviously it is a dire matter, which is why it is before you right now. But it is not simply a matter of the King's say-so. The Queen was married by the Chantry and publicly crowned. The King cannot undo that with a proclamation. And the Landsmeet would not ratify it if he did."

His eyes bored into hers. "You think not?"

"Well," she considered. "He obviously won't have the support of Gwaren and the banns sworn to you. Nor, I can assure you, will he have the support of Highever and our vassals. To do him justice, if Rendon Howe were to attend a Landsmeet, he would not support the King in this either. My cousin Bryland's loyalty to Ferelden I am certain of. Arl Wulffe, agree to recognize the Empress as Queen of Ferelden? I don't believe it for an instant."

"You say nothing of the Arl of Denerim."

She bit her lip. "I don't know him well enough to say. It's possible that he had dealing through Marjolaine, but to say he is a traitor — no, I can't support that with serious evidence. Arl Eamon does seem to have been an intermediary, but..."

"Eamon is no longer a problem."

"Indeed. I heard dreadful things of the events at Redcliffe."

"Whatever you heard was paler than reality. Teagan seems honest enough, and his arling is too weakened to be a threat. However, that might be an incentive to seek help from over the border. And the Bannorn is a wayward animal."

She sat down again, thinking. With a half smile, he pulled his chair closer, and sat down facing her. He said, "I would offer you another cup of wine, but you might shy it at my head again."

That got an angry, embarrassed scowl from her. "If it makes you feel better, you can throw your own cup at me, and call us even."

A grim laugh escaped him. "Perhaps I shall, someday, if

you make me angry enough." He sat back thinking. "What a time to instigate a civil war! For civil war we shall have, if Cailan follows through with this scheme of his. And with what army does he expect to enforce it?"

"Well," she said slowly, a quite horrible thought occurring to her. "The Empress knows it is a Blight. Her own Wardens will have told her so. She knows the bulk of the Fereldan army is pinned down here in the south. She may not wish to involve herself openly, but there is something that must be done before she can marry the King, and only the Divine in Val Royeaux can do it for her. The Divine could annul the marriage of Cailan and Anora, and the Grand Cleric in Ferelden would proclaim it. You have always been so concerned about the Grey Wardens being a private army under foreign control. May I direct your attention to a much larger armed force, also under foreign control, whose commander is indisputably Orlesian?"

It had already occurred to Loghain. The bloody Templars. They were indeed under Chantry control, and they were everywhere. In a low voice, he ground out, "How I hate the bloody Chantry."

Bronwyn nodded. She was quite fond of their own priest, Mother Mallol, back in Highever. She hoped that she had escaped the massacre. For all that, Father and Mother had told her stories of how the Chantry had collaborated in the invasion: how the Grand Cleric, Mother Bronach, had declared it the will of the Maker, and those who rebelled against the

usurper Meghren, to be rebels against divine authority. Most of the priests and Templars had been loyal to the Grand Cleric, and had formed a network of informers: educated and literate, collecting intelligence in every town and village.

"They've been traitors to Ferelden in the past. Father explained that King Maric could not sever ties with the Divine, for fear of her calling an Exalted March against Ferelden. They've always been the dagger poised to strike against us. Even now, they are doing nothing to defend this country. It's all completely business as usual. The Grand Cleric even has her right hand, Revered Mother Clarine, here, spying and interfering. I don't suppose you can get rid of her?"

"Short of feeding her to the darkspawn, I think not," Loghain said acidly. He thought a little more. "Anora is in danger, but I cannot leave the army."

"I really don't think the King would harm her."

He raised his brows at her.

"I mean," Bronwyn clarified, "that I don't think he would physically hurt her. Here's a thought..." she considered. "I have to go north – a little north of South Reach, I understand, to find that other Dalish clan. I'll go to Denerim and warn her personally. I could take her a letter from you, and no one else would need to know."

"And what about the darkspawn?"

"I'll leave most of the Wardens behind... including..." she made her decision. "Including Alistair. He's Senior Warden, anyway, so it would seem reasonable. If things

get very bad, you'd want him with you, anyway."

He scoffed. "Are you proposing that I ultimately replace Cailan with another son of Maric, even more deplorably unprepared to be King?"

"I am not proposing anything of the sort. However, it might be more prudent for him to be under your command than under the King's. Alistair is a very fine warrior, and a very decent and modest young man."

"It is my understanding that he has a great deal to be modest about."

She did not find that funny. "I see you find it easy to despise someone who was abandoned by his own father, and brought up as a stableboy by a malicious noble, who wanted his nephew to have no rivals!"

"Come," he said tiredly. "let us not quarrel over trifles. I promise not to be unkind to your faithful Alistair, but he'll have to pull his weight with me."

"And he will. He knows nothing about my intent to lay bare the cherished secrets of the Wardens, so please don't gloat about it to him. It's enough that you know the facts and can plan accordingly."

"Enough about him," Loghain said roughly. "We have more important things to consider. I want you to meet with my engineers tomorrow, and hear what they have planned for the Archdemon – if the beast ever deigns to make an appearance. I'll write a letter to Anora, warning her of Cailan's plans. Meet that Dalish Keeper if you must,

but then we must consider the army complete. Try not to get distracted by blood feuds when you're in Denerim."

"Howe may not attend the Landsmeet. If he does not, Fergus will want the King's leave to attack him."

Loghain used a word Bronwyn had not expected to hear from him. "And so we shall have civil war of some sort. Was that the bard's plan all along?"

"One of them certainly. I think it's clear that Orlais has more than one string to its bow. Even the attempt to abduct Alistair and me I regard less as an attempt to create puppet monarchs than to remove possible alternatives to Cailan. Fergus, too, is in danger for that reason, hence the attempt to discredit the Couslands. The Empress will do everything to smooth his way."

"And hers. You do realize, don't you, that if Cailan renounces Anora and betroths himself to Celene, I *will* march on him."

She nodded gravely. "I would expect nothing else. And I will march with you, if the darkspawn let me."

He thought himself too old to be touched by gallant gestures, but so he was. "Even though I shall be declared a traitor to Ferelden?"

She thought a little longer, and said, "Ferelden is not the King; and the King is not Ferelden. This is our country as much as Cailan's. It is not his to barter away like a drunken woman selling her children's clothes for more ale."

He studied her face. "I thought the Wardens were loyal to no country."

Her wry smile reached to her brilliantly green eyes. "I've never claimed to be a very good Warden, my lord."

He reached out to her, and they shook hands on their alliance with conscious gravity, wondering what would come of it.



LOGHAIN MACTIR, TEYRN OF GWAREN

CHAPTER 7

SHADOW OF THE EMPIRE

F BRONWYN THOUGHT SHE WOULD BE PERMITTED TO GO TO BED IN PEACE AFTER HER STORMY INTERVIEW WITH TEYRN

LOGHAIN, SHE WAS MUCH MISTAKEN.

Her companions were waiting for her in the Wardens' quarters. Every eye was on her, and the moment she came through the door, they gathered around her like a clutch of hens, squawking and clucking at her, full of questions, and the men as bad as the women. Questions, suppositions, utterly bizarre scenarios poured from their mouths.

Bronwyn shook her head. "I'm going to bed!"

She slipped off her Warden's tabard and folded it neatly, then sat down on the edge of her cot, struggling out of her boots. Tara knelt down and helped her, while still carrying on about the excitement of the day.

"...so we wondered what had happened, of course, when you went upstairs with him and *shut the door...*"

With the mob around her, a thorough wash was impossible. Bronwyn decided she would get up very early in the

morning — before anyone else — and clean up properly then. She lay back wearily on the hard and narrow cot, trying to ignore her comrades standing around her, staring down at her. She shut her eyes.

No one moved. They simply carried on their conversation, surrounding her on all sides. Bronwyn blew out a breath and opened her eyes.

They were still staring at her, only now they had been joined by Scout, who was staring at her as well. And panting in her face. And everyone started clacking away at her again.

True, not all of them. Adaia hung back from the mob, not daring to ask questions, but attentive to any shred of gossip. She had sat at the end of the Wardens, hidden behind Zevran, and had hardly dared to glance at the table where Lady Bronwyn sat with Teyrn Loghain and the other nobles. Next time — perhaps tomorrow night! — she would be bolder.

Two of the others were less interested. Sten oiled the straps of his armor, impervious to the fascinations of human politics. Danith had moved away to a bench and looked at the rest of the companions as if they were speaking Tevinter.

"All right. I surrender." Bronwyn groaned and sat up, knowing she had to tell them something. She found it was it too annoying to sit when they were all still staring down at her, so she forced herself to her feet, and moved to the center of the room, so everyone could hear what she had to say.

Briefly, she gave them the bare bones of the discussion, without, alas, the gory details they were hoping for.

"Teyrn Loghain and I discussed our mission, and I told him about our adventures in Orzammar. I told him about our meeting with the Dalish at some length. We agreed that I should go north and find that other clan we were told of. Some of you will go with me, and some of you will stay here to assist the army, which will now expand its operations and extend its defensive line."

"But you were arguing," Anders said. "Everyone could hear you!"

"That's right," Alistair agreed. "We thought you might be having a fight." He looked very hopeful, which did not improve Bronwyn's temper, already in a fragile state. She was still irritated with the Teyrn for seeming to lend credence to Arl Howe's lies, but she did not want to spread the word that there had been dissension between the two of them.

Cullen put in, "We were alarmed that he might even attack you. We were deciding what to do in such a case, but then you stopped shouting at each other..."

"Teyrn Loghain told me of some letters received by him from Arl Howe, detailing his reasons for his treacherous murder of my family. The lies were so egregious that I became upset. It hardly matters. We resolved our differences, and we're all right now."

"How all right?" Brosca asked baldly. "I think he's interested in you. I could see him giving you the eye at dinner, when you weren't looking."

"That's true!" Tara seconded her. "Everybody could see it!

He thinks you're very pretty. I can tell."

Oghren chuckled, "After the all the yelling, we thought maybe you two were having some hot make-up sex. Sometimes that's the best kind – "

Bronwyn was on the verge of explosion. She gritted her teeth, and very carefully did not shout. "I have never had sex with that man! And I would appreciate it if my own friends did not spread such horrible rumors!"

Leliana said kindly, "There's nothing horrible about romance. If you and Teyrn Loghain found each other desirable, then we would never stand in the way of your happiness."

Most of the women nodded solemnly, except for Morigan who laughed at her, yellow eyes bright and noticing; and Astrid, who raised a questioning brow.

Most of the men, however, had their own and very different opinion about the idea of sex involving Bronwyn and Teyrn Loghain. She could see the looks exchanged between Alistair and Cullen (aghast), Anders and Jowan (concerned), and Oghren and Zevran (amused, but clearly thinking it a very bad thing).

She was their commander, and there was a limit to how much impertinence she was prepared to put up with.

"The Teyrn and I do not have a personal relationship. If that changes in the future – "

"Aha!" cackled Oghren.

Bronwyn frowned, "If that were to *change* in the future, I would be sure to tell my friends. In the meantime, I shall

keep you informed of the *military* situation. Now. No more questions or I'll set Scout on you. I am going to get some sleep. I suggest you all do the same."

A few discontented murmurs trailed after her. Bronwyn shut her eyes, lay down again, and was soon, unpleasantly but necessarily, in the Fade.

While her companions were silenced – at least as far as speaking to her directly – Bronwyn could see, to her exasperation, that she was Ostagar's favorite object of gossip. When they came down to breakfast the next morning, grabbing an empty table to share, Bronwyn found herself the cynosure of all eyes in the mess hall. A bowl of porridge was put before her, and she ate ravenously, trying to ignore the stares – hungry stares and envious stares and shocked stares – and the eager whispers. Apparently, her conversation with the Teyrn was the talk of the camp.

Everyone grabbed at her comrades, dragging them away to corners, trying to get the whole story out them. Leliana was a favorite: she was young and pretty and *human*, and the women thought she'd be a good source of gossip. The men thought the same, and thought that even if she weren't, she was well worth chatting up.

She smiled and shook her head, and sometimes added a few words. Her listeners were disappointed, and went away. Bronwyn tried to busy herself with her porridge.

They learned not to try it with Alistair or Cullen. Alistair

was a terrible gossip himself, but was displeased with the kind of questions people were asking. Cullen looked like he was about to go for his sword. A man backed away, smiling, hands up in a peaceful gesture. Cullen snarled something in a low voice.

There were dwarves in the hall, and they were gossiping too: more frankly, and with no emotional stake in the matter. Some were approaching her people. Brosca and Oghren would laugh and shake their heads, making some sort of quip or other. Astrid was quieter, but absolutely firm with the busybodies.

After awhile, her friends came back to the table, and sat there, watching her with bright, alert eyes. It was terribly annoying, but better than being stared at when she was trying to sleep.

Bronwyn finished her bowl, wishing there was more, and then abruptly asked, "What?"

Tara announced, "Everyone's talking about you, Bronwyn. You want to know why?"

"Somehow," Bronwyn grimaced, "I think I really, really don't."

Brosca grinned, and leaned in, "Well, we're going to tell you, anyway. Everybody heard you and the big guy yelling at each other last night. And then they heard things get quiet. And then you came out of his quarters, looking relaxed and with messy hair. And his servants said that somebody had pushed everything off his desk onto the floor – like they were in a *big hurry*."

"You didn't tell us that Teyrn Loghain pushed everything off his desk," Leliana said reprovingly.

"That's because he didn't," Bronwyn said frankly. "I did." Seeing their shocked, incredulous faces, she shrugged, rather embarrassed in retrospect. "I did it in a fit of temper. I told you that he brought up Arl Howe's accusation. I threw a wine goblet at him and I swept everything off his writing table. Please don't spread that around. It makes me sound like a naughty child."

"So..." Oghren leered. "You didn't clear the desk in order to... how shall I put this delicately...?"

"*You* couldn't!" laughed Brosca.

Bronwyn tried to follow the conversation, more and more bewildered and exasperated.

Astrid cut the misery short. "They are implying that you and Teyrn Loghain cleared off the desk in order to have sex there."

"*What?*" Bronwyn shot to her feet, eyes blazing. Like waves in an ebb tide, everyone else at the table leaned away from her. She glared at them, and lowered her voice. "*Nothing* of that sort happened, and I will thank you not to make up scandalous stories about me. Sex on a desk, indeed!"

Her face must be red. It felt hot enough.

"I told you so!" Alistair declared triumphantly. "Bronwyn would never do something like that!"

She could hardly hear him. She did not want to look at any of them at the moment. Enraged and humiliated, she stalked from the mess hall, and strode down the stairs,

needing some fresh air to cool her burning embarrassment. Scout placidly trotted after her, wanting a run outside. Soldiers watched her, wide-eyed, and nudged each other, talking in low voices.

To complete her morning, she was almost immediately joined by Loghain, looking infuriatingly well-rested and freshly-shaved. He was, of course, already out and about, and wanted to show her something. Scout, the traitor, wagged his tail at him.

"And look at this one, Warden!" A pop and a slam, and the bolts were soaring out over the bone-riddled Ostagar Valley. Smoke drifted back in a wake of black and grey. The bolts slammed into the ground, and a second later, an explosion shook the stones. A sullen blaze licked at the dead, dry grass in the distance.

"Pretty neat, huh?" asked Dworkin, leering at her, unintimidated by the looming presence of Teyrn Loghain.

"I'm impressed!" Bronwyn granted freely. "I'd love to see what they do to an ogre!"

"I can describe it for you, if you like," Loghain offered, his smile sardonic. "It's very interesting seeing something that large burning while disemboweled."

"Ew, thanks all the same!" Bronwyn laughed. She waved a hand at another of the prototypes. "I like that design with the multiple bolts."

"Look at this!" Dworkin said excitedly, winding a crank,

which caused the aim of the bolts to spread out, fan-like. "I can focus on a target, or we can go for wide-spread damage."

"And that's not all, Warden," Dworkin's brother Voldrik assured her, in a calmer, smoother tone. "We can load the trebuchet with explosives too, and put them in a container with trash – stones, broken metal, bits of chain. When the container explodes, all that metal causes catastrophic damage to the enemy."

Bronwyn nodded, appreciating the image that conveyed.

"I can certainly see why you've been holding the Horde back so well. Isn't that something of the effect that Qunari cannons are supposed to have?"

"Why don't you ask your pet Qunari?" Loghain wondered.

Bronwyn made a face. "It's impossible to get him to talk about that. It's a deep, dark secret of his race. For all I know, he's not in on it, and it embarrasses him. We're not likely to get the secret of cannons out of Sten."

"No," Loghain said crisply. "Instead, he is gathering useful intelligence about Ferelden and its military capabilities."

Bronwyn gave him a tight smile, not wanting to argue with him so early in the morning. He really was a very difficult man, just as Mother had always warned her. It was so vexing to have her every decision second-guessed after the fact. She took a firm grip on her temper and changed the subject.

"I suppose accurate aim is difficult to achieve...?"

Voldrik and Dworkin were off: telling the lengthy and rather boring tale of how they had created sighting devices

that permitted them to nail a target at long range within a few feet. While she could hardly follow the technical details, the result was clear enough and very satisfactory. She asked to be given a chance to aim and fire one of the improved ballistae herself, and the three men were only too happy to accommodate her.

Loghain, truth be told, was as enthusiastic as any dwarven engineer. Bronwyn had not known that he was interested in machines, but she should have guessed that war machines – or anything that would give him an edge over an enemy – would have his undivided attention. More than that, though: he actually seemed to understand what the dwarves were talking about when they went on about "trajectory" and "payload."

The dwarves withdrew, debating an arcane issue between themselves, hands sketching the argument in the air.

Loghain put a hand on the mount of one of the ballistae, admiring it as he would a good horse.

"Something worthwhile will have come out of this, if Ferelden has new weapons to defend itself."

"If their accuracy is as good as the dwarves claim, perhaps similar devices need to be installed to defend fortresses and harbors throughout Ferelden."

Loghain nodded. The Orlesians had invaded by sea, and had swept over Ferelden like a storm. If the ships could have been destroyed before the chevaliers had landed...

But this time, if the ships came, it would be at the invi-



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tation of Ferelden's own King. Gherlen's Halt would admit the chevaliers at the border, the mountain passes open to them like any trollop at the Pearl. How much time did they have to prevent this? Could they defend a divided Ferelden against the darkspawn, the Orlesians, *and* its own King?

The girl felt the Blight had to be the first priority, which was no great surprise. Loghain admitted to himself that she had made good arguments for it. Ferelden had risen from the ashes of the Orlesian occupation, and it could do so again. If, however, the country were laid waste, polluted, and depopulated by the darkspawn, it might be too weakened to constitute a viable nation ever again.

After sleeping on it, it was clear to Loghain that they could not give up the fight at Ostagar, without consigning half of Ferelden to the darkspawn. That did not mean that there were not other priorities.

Cailan. Loghain had to find a way to neutralize the threat Cailan posed to Ferelden. He needed to get him back under his eye. And there were ways to do that...

"When you take the letter to Anora," he said to Bronwyn, "Ask for an audience with the King. You need to report to him, anyway. Be sure to take your Dalish girl with you. Have her wear that scanty Dalish armor. Perhaps His Majesty will not wish to miss the glorious moment when the Elves arrive to fight once more at the side of Men."

The shadow of the Orlesian Empire was creeping closer, but it would not fall on Ferelden again while Loghain Mac Tir lived.



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Adaia needed to find something to do. She had listened attentively to Danith's daily lesson of elven lore. Zevran was kind enough to give her an hour of training time, but then he wanted to see more of the camp. She decided to tag after him. People had broken up into groups, since Lady Bronwyn went off to consult with Teyrn Loghain. Adaia was supposed to find work at Ostagar, and might as well see what was available. Before... *everything*... happened, she might have sung songs like Leliana, but Bann Vaughan and his men had ended her singing forever.

Sten was sitting in a position that ought to be impossible, his eyes shut. Tara told her it was called 'meditating,' and it was something Qunari did, when they were thinking about their Qun thing. It did not look very comfortable to Adaia.

Brosca was fun and friendly, but she had gone with Oghren to visit some dwarves they knew. They were talking about setting up a proper brewery here. Dwarves were good at brewing ale out of nearly anything. If it was drinkable, they would probably make their fortune.

Tara was busy, talking in low tones with the other mages. They did not seem to want anyone to hear what they were saying. That yellow-eyed witch, the woman named Morigan, had a book she was showing them. They all were looking worried, especially the witch's lover, the tall blond mage. It was some sort of magical business, and while Adaia was growing used to mages, she knew she wanted



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to do nothing to annoy them. The two men always spoke pleasantly to her, but Adaia was afraid of Morrigan.

Alistair and Cullen and Leliana were visiting people they knew, important people like knights and templars and captains. They were going on a patrol tomorrow, and wanted to find out what other people knew about the nearby darkspawn. Astrid, the serious dwarf Warden, had gone with them. She was important, too. Tara had told her she was a princess in exile, driven from her home by her brother. Adaia did not think Astrid looked much like a princess ought to look, but maybe that was just because she was a dwarf. Or maybe because she needed to do something with her hair. Adaia had seen Queen Anora once, and her hair had been *lovely*.

"Danith!" she called shyly. She was becoming less self-conscious about her voice. The Dalish girl looked up. "Zevran and I are going for a walk around the camp. Would you like to come with us?"

"That is very courteous of you," Danith answered, feeling some hesitation in accepting. Still, it was very dull in this stone tower... "Yes, I should see the camp and understand the ways of these shemlens."

Again she hesitated. Her armor was safe and familiar, but the shemlens stared at her so. After a moment, she snatched up her Warden tabard and dropped it over her head, covering herself with it. Perhaps it would be best if the shemlens saw a Warden, and not an *asha* of the *elvhen*.



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There was no shame in a being a Grey Warden, though the separation from her clan and the hideous dreams made it a burden. She remembered she had some coin, too, and a few items shared out to her from darkspawn loot. Perhaps the shemlens might have useful items for trade...

The air outside was foul, but not as foul as the air inside. The camp stank of shemlen and durgen'len and their beasts, but there was at least a breeze. Far away, Danith could catch the deeper foulness of darkspawn, and sense a faint, unwelcome presence in her blood. Bronwyn had told her that eventually she would be able to sense fellow Wardens as well, which would be useful, she supposed.

And since they were together, she could continue Adaia's lessons.

"Who is the Great Protector?" she asked.

"Mythal," Zevran answered instantly, grinning at her. Danith frowned at him.

"The question was for Adaia."

"Mythal," Adaia croaked out, a moment later. "I know that one. I really do."

"And who, *Adaia*," Danith continued, glaring at Zevran, "Is the Goddess of the Hunt, and the creator of the *Vir Tanadahl*?"

"I know that one, too!" Adaia said, excited. "That's Andruil: Sister of the Moon, Mother of Hares, Lady of the Hunt. Andruil."

"Well done. And who is her sister?"

They talked, happily oblivious to the admiring stares,

all the way to the quartermaster, and then all the way to an equally interesting place...

"They let us stay and see everything," Adaia croaked happily to Tara, enjoying her midday meal. "And then they let me help!"

Zevran shrugged. "I know few craftsmen whether human, dwarf, or elf, who will refuse free labor. Nonetheless, I agree that it was interesting. I have some small skill with poisons myself, but I found much to learn there."

Danith said nothing, but nodded. In the crafthouse, all three races had worked together, and the dwarven craftmasters had not spoken slightingly to anyone. What mattered there was not race, but skill and diligence. She herself was familiar enough with what could be done with deathroot and blood lotus, but the craftmasters had studied the matter, and were not only creating stronger poisons, but 'bombs.' These were mixtures held in flasks, which when thrown would make a firestorm, or freeze any enemy (or friend) upon whom the mixture splashed. Some contained lyrium sand, and would explode with a great noise. The blast from these bombs struck the enemy like a great fist. Small bombs were made for soldiers to carry, and large ones were being built, to be loaded into the great war machines, to rain death upon the darkspawn.

It was worthwhile to learn stronger poisons for arrows and blades, but the bombs made her a little uneasy. It

would be so easy to harm innocents if they were cast carelessly. Nor did using them take any more skill than a strong throwing arm. They seemed... impersonal... to her.

But Adaia was eager to make herself useful, and the dwarves, seeing her in the company of a Warden, were well-disposed toward her, and had offered her employment. Zevran stepped in, seeming to think the amount of coin offered was insufficient. After some strange talk and much complaining, Adaia was offered a larger sum, and seemed very pleased.

"I'll be earning more than I ever did when I was in the Alienage, and I'll be doing my part for the war effort! I have a real job!" She was very happy, and her curious croaking voice was not as harsh as usual. Danith could not grudge her the chance to be of use. Nonetheless, she would see that the girl continued her lessons in the ways of their people.

The news of Adaia's good fortune was passed up and down the Wardens' table, and everyone had kind words for her. Sten was particularly approving.

"For a woman to work as an artisan is appropriate, and in accordance with the Qun. Very suitable."

Adaia looked at the door to the mess hall, hoping that Lady Bronwyn would arrive soon. She was particularly anxious to tell the noblewoman that she had found something to do besides cook porridge and sponge on the Wardens. Making poisons and bombs was something the Warden-Commander was bound to approve of.

A quick hand snatched a piece of bread off her plate.

Brosca grinned at her teasingly. "Too slow, newbie! Anyway, good luck with the poisons! Before you know it, you'll be a respectable tax-paying member of society! Too bad."

Oghren modestly agreed, "Aye. You *could* have learned to brew ale from an expert. Oh, well, we can't all be lucky..."

They were talking and laughing so much that Adaia never heard the footsteps behind her. Not until he was nearly on her did she see the look on the faces of her friends across the table.

Loghain remembered that Grey Wardens were always hungry. His morning meeting with Bronwyn had gone extremely well, with no goblet-throwing or other acts of violence toward him. Truth be told, he did not hold last night's explosion against her. So many people were afraid of him: afraid to disagree, afraid to tell him their true opinions, afraid of losing their privileges or offices.

Cailan had no problem shouting at him, of course, but Cailan was invariably *wrong*. Bronwyn was young and inexperienced; but she was a brave and clever girl, and had learned a great deal from her adventures, and knew she had yet more to learn. She was capable of opposing him with sound arguments, and in that she was rather like Anora. It was very pleasant, spending a morning with her, seeing her interest in the new machines, sharing ideas and making plans. He regretted that she would be leaving the day after tomorrow. He had almost suggested

that she send one of her Wardens instead, but that was simply a moment of weakness on his part. She must go. No one else could manage the business as well.

"I imagine you're ready for a midday meal after all that," he said, walking back to the Tower with her. "Perhaps you wouldn't object to sharing mine. I want to go over some maps of the Wilds with you..."

There was noise ahead. Loghain quickened his step. Bronwyn flicked him a concerned glance, matching her stride to his. The doors were open, and there was excited shouting coming from the mess hall. For a moment Bronwyn was rather pleased. It appeared that the army would have something to talk about, other than the imaginary romance between Teyrn Loghain and herself.

She felt very differently when they entered the mess hall, and found Bann Vaughan, face purple with rage, facing off against a furious, indignant Alistair. He was too fit to turn purple, but was a rather handsome shade of reddish bronze.

"Enough!" Loghain bellowed. His voice cut through the cat-calls and shouts, and a path opened up as soldiers shrank back to make way for the Teyrn and the Girl Warden. The atmosphere of the room changed slightly, as everyone hoped for a different but equally entertaining spectacle from that of a nobleman and a Warden fighting over an elf girl.

Vaughan's bodyguard had their hands on their swords: a dozen of them were eyeing the motley band of Wardens. Rather dubiously eyeing them, actually, for the motley

band looked uncommonly menacing. Brosca ducked under Alistair's arm and stuck her tongue out at Vaughan, then grinned ferociously. The mages had slowly risen to their feet, and they were not smiling, but looking very calm and deliberate. Alistair and Cullen were bigger than any of Vaughan's men. And then there was Sten.

For a moment Loghain was tempted to let them have at it, just to see how quickly the Wardens could annihilate Vaughan and his men. That was a bad idea, of course.

"Bann Vaughan," he growled, with a semblance of calm. "If there is a dispute, let us take it somewhere private."

"That little whore is a wanted criminal!" Vaughan snarled, pointing at Adaia. She did not cringe, but bared her teeth, crouching defensively. To Loghain she looked like a starved kitten, readying herself to fight to the last. With a start, he recognized one of the mages. It was that apostate... Jowan... the one he had set on Eamon. The fellow flinched as Loghain's gaze fell on him, and he stared fixedly at the floor.

Alistair yelled back at Vaughan, "She's a Warden recruit! She was conscripted, and there's nothing you can do to her!"

Bronwyn nearly hissed in surprise, but managed to control her face. Alistair had put her in quite the predicament, laying her credibility as Warden-Commander on the line. He was her second, and she could not make a fool of him in front of these men. Not in front of Vaughan, whom she despised. Not in front of Teyrn Loghain, who would be

glad to have an excuse to think meanly of Maric's bastard. Alistair trusted her, and she would not betray him.

"The Senior Warden is correct," she said clearly, in a calm and neutral tone. "This young woman has been conscripted, and is therefore no longer under the authority of the Arl of Denerim. Or his son."

Vaughan looked ready to burst. "Outrageous!" he sputtered.

"Come," Loghain said sharply. "My lord, we will discuss this *privately*. Warden-Commander, bring your Second and the recruit with you."

Scout was growling at Vaughan, which would not improve matters. Bronwyn whispered, "Stay!" and Sten obliging caught the dog by the collar. Leliana distracted him with a bit of smoked venison.

A very uncomfortable walk to Loghain's quarters followed. Bronwyn pretended to have little personal stake in the matter, though she was enraged that Vaughan would insult any follower of hers in such a way. She kept her face pleasantly neutral, and walked beside Vaughan, looking at him seriously, with a show of respect for his status and his anger.

The door was shut, and Loghain said curtly, "Bann Vaughan, if you please, tell us... *quietly*... what claim you have on this girl."

Vaughan sneered. "She's a thief, a whore, and a murderer from the Denerim Alienage."

Alistair and Adaia each took a breath, ready to counter the accusation. Bronwyn shook her head, just a little at

Alistair. He calmed himself, and put his hand protectively on Adaia's shoulder. Tears of despair and helplessness were pooling in the girl's eyes.

Vaughan stared down at her from his greater height, but did not come within Alistair's reach. "She was one of the instigators of the riot in which I was attacked and wounded." He fingered the fading scar on his jaw, recalling the utter shock of a pack of knife-eared wenches daring to turn on him. "Members of my personal guard were murdered, and the estate was looted of treasure over the felonious amount of one sovereign. As the attack was made on the household of her rightful lord, we can add Petty Treason to the charges of murder, riot, and grand theft. As such, she won't just hang: she'll be drawn and quartered as well."

Adaia was crying now. "But *he* was the one – "

Bronwyn put a hand on her other shoulder, and turned to Vaughan, using every ounce of control. It was easier than last night. She had not had too much wine. She expected nothing better of a man like Vaughan. She would deal with this, and she would win.

"I am sorry that situation is so grievous to you, my lord," she said quietly. "I deeply regret that you were injured. I, certainly, can imagine the pain you must have endured."

Those words, uttered in a soothing tone and with a sad smile, drained the worst of Vaughan's rage. He glanced at the long white scar marring her face – *a great pity, that*, he thought – and nodded brusquely. He had no great desire

to start a feud with a Cousland. Fergus was close to the King, and everyone had heard the rumors about Bronwyn and Teyrn Loghain.

"...That said," she continued, "law and custom are perfectly clear on the matter. Adaia here – "

"That's not her name," Vaughan interrupted nastily. "The little strumpet has lied to you even about that. She's Melian Tabris, daughter of Cyrion Tabris the ragpicker."

Bronwyn raised her brows at Adaia.

The girl croaked out, "Adaia was my mother's name, my lady. I like it."

Loghain frowned at the sound of the girl's voice. Had she been injured? He looked at her neck for bruises, but saw none. He had never met an elf with a voice like that.

Bronwyn shrugged. "She wouldn't be the first lad or lass who went for a soldier under an assumed name. In fact, her having a Dalish-sounding name disposed the Dalish to be friendlier toward us than they might otherwise have been. No, my lord," she smiled, pleasantly self-deprecating, at Vaughan. "Her name means little or nothing. As I said, law and custom are quite clear. No matter how grave her offences, they were committed prior to her conscription. She is now under the aegis of the Grey Wardens, and is as dead to her old life as if she *had* been executed."

Before Vaughan could finish taking another breath, Loghain cut in. "Vaughan, the girl is now beyond your authority. You must accept it, as indeed must we all. As

for you, Warden-Commander, choose your recruits with greater care in future."

Bronwyn bowed her head in nicely-judged submission.

Loghain was not finished. "— and I do not want to see this girl flaunting her impunity in the face of a Ferelden lord." He frowned at the little elf, and his gaze shifted to Alistair, who grimaced. "And while I understand that your Senior Warden was doing his duty in defending a recruit, he must also remember the respect owed to members of the Landsmeet."

"Yes, my lord," Alistair muttered. "Sorry, my lord." He saw Bronwyn raise her brows again, and he turned to Vaughan. "Sorry, my lord. Just doing my duty."

Vaughan preened, somewhat mollified, and smirked at Alistair. His sense of superiority was finding solid ground once more. "Quite all right, Senior Warden," he said, flicking his fingers at him as if dismissing a clumsy servant.

Bronwyn suggested, "Perhaps the Senior Warden and my recruit could return to their duties now, my lord?"

Loghain waved them away. Alistair gave him a very shallow bow and the girl a frantic bob of curtsy. They were gone, and the door shut behind them.

Vaughan growled, "I can't believe you'd defend that little knife-ears!"

Bronwyn had been expecting something of the sort, and maintained her composure.

"What I cannot believe, my lord, is that you would wish to quarrel with me over an *elf girl!*" she smiled warmly at

Vaughan, deceit curdling in her belly. "Really, we came across her on the road and conscripted her. The Wardens are always looking for people whose families won't be crying after them. Her punishment, which you are so eager for, is to come south and fight the darkspawn! How long do you think she'll live, raw and untrained as she is?"

Vaughan was still indignant and thwarted, but huffed a contemptuous snort at that. "Her head will be on a stick within the week!"

With a show of sad resignation, Bronwyn agreed with him. "Very likely. The Maker metes out his justice in mysterious ways. Let us not quarrel over trifles, my lord. Of course you are angry at the abnegation of your usual authority. I *understand* that. It is very vexing, but these things happen. Had I known her background, of course I would have left her to your justice, but what's done is done. I cannot release her to you. She is a Warden, and therefore *my* problem. I *will* fulfill all my duties. That means that I shall allot her tasks, punish her fairly, and protect her to the best of my ability."

"It's the *principle* of the thing, Bronwyn," Vaughan whined, very aggrieved, but on the way to accepting the current situation.

"I know," she agreed sympathetically. "These are strange times."

"You can't discharge her from the Wardens into my custody?" he asked, a little slyly.

"No, Vaughan," she assured him, perfectly polite but perfectly firm. "Once a Warden, always a Warden. Besides, I

was conscripted myself. If *I* have to serve, then that girl *certainly* does!"

He nodded. "Father told me all about it. An absolute scandal, that fellow Duncan taking advantage of the Highever crisis like that."

"We *must* be united," Loghain broke in sharply, annoyed at how easily the girl was winding Vaughan around her little finger. The temper she had shown him last night had been all Eleanor. This was Bryce at his most subtly engaging. She had better not try such tricks with him.

However, if she could do something to keep Vaughan from becoming disaffected, and prevent him from colluding with Cailan and his puppeteers in Orlais, Loghain acknowledged that he would have to put up with witnessing this kind of shoddy spectacle. He continued, "To that end, I want you, Bann Vaughan, to sit beside the Warden-Commander at dinner tonight, and to make plain there are no hard feelings."

"What a good idea!" Bronwyn said, managing a cheerful smile.

Vaughan gave her what he imagined to be a gallant bow. "I would be honored... and charmed."

Anora was not a fool. That was the quality in herself she clung to. She was not a fool. Her intelligence was her sword and shield, and she could use it as effectively as her father wielded a blade.

Cailan was up to something. He thought himself very clever, but there was a boastfulness in him, a childish vain-glory that prevented any real disguise. He went about the Palace smiling, even smug. His expression practically shouted, "Something is coming, though you do not know about it."

Erlina had been watching him, but was herself baffled. Somehow, Cailan must be receiving secret communications from somewhere. It was genuinely alarming.

He had been particularly friendly with Fergus Cousland of late. Genial... even generous. He had given Fergus some fine gifts, and had invited him to sit at his side at dinner. For all that, there was something in his manner that rang false. Was he plotting against the Teyrn of Highever?

The true Teyrn of Highever, of course. Rendon Howe was calling himself Teyrn of Highever, but Anora did not write to him using that title. At the very least, the Landsmeet would have to ratify it, and Anora did not see that happening any time soon.

Rendon Howe was in serious trouble, anyway. A week had passed, and he had not arrived in Denerim to make his case before the Landsmeet. Letters had come, explaining his delays very plausibly, wanting assurances and offering fulsome flattery. It annoyed Anora beyond words that Cailan gave any weight to the man's excuses. While a true politician kept all his options open, it seemed too egregiously two-faced to act as if Fergus Cousland were his blood brother, while also indulging the disobedience of Rendon Howe. It was clumsy: it

was not subtle, but the very opposite. The Arl of Amaranthine had refused to obey his King's command to attend him, and that, Anora thought, should be that.

But the week was over, and there could be no more delays. The young Teyrn had readied his forces, recruited yet more, hired some dwarven engineers, and was ready to march on Amaranthine.

She had spoken to Cailan about it. She had spoken to him repeatedly, and he had put her off: treating it as a great joke. She could not make him see that every day he permitted Rendon Howe to ignore royal commands resulted in a further diminishment of royal authority. What were the rest of the nobility to think, when they saw that Arl Howe could disobey the King with impunity?

The dwarves were joining the army in the south, but Cailan did not seem interested in the war anymore. He spoke slightly of Bronwyn Cousland's diplomacy — though never to her brother's face — as if *anyone* could have managed it. From the rumors that were coming out of Orzammar, Anora suspected that it had taken quite a bit of doing to persuade the dwarves to commit to the fight on the surface. Cailan seemed to feel that the Girl Warden had inconvenienced him in some way. Anora did not know what to make of it.

The Grand Cleric had come to see him yesterday, and Anora had known nothing about it until the woman was gone. Worse still, she still did not know what the two of

them had talked about, closeted together for two hours in the mid-afternoon, while Anora had her tea break. Cailan had chuckled, and patted her head, and told her that it was nothing for her to worry about. He felt it was only right to take on some of the burden of those tiresome, routine visits, especially when she was unwell.

Unwell? Yes — it was true. She had not been particularly well of late. She tired easily, and was often oddly thirsty. It was hard to concentrate sometimes. When it was particularly bad, her thoughts circled in her head like startled magpies. Her afternoon tea soothed her. She was looking forward to it very much today.

"Majesty?" Erlina called softly. "Are you awake?"

That was another thing. Perhaps she was overtired, for she found herself falling asleep in the afternoons. It was absurd. She was no child, to be taking naps. The strain of the past few months had been great, but her father was certainly under even greater stress, and no one told tales of him weakening. Quite the contrary. It would be dreadful if word came to him that his daughter was growing slack and slothful..

"Yes, I am quite awake," Anora said clearly, after taking a moment to clear the cobwebs from her mind. "You may fetch the tea now, Erlina."

The maid took a moment in the anteroom to arrange the tray. The Queen was fond of roses, and the gardener had gathered some lovely white ones today. Erlina had chosen the most perfect of them for the Queen's tray. Poor

thing, it was the least she could do.

The tea was just as it should be. The King was not taking tea here today, being busy in the sparring yard this afternoon. The tea, therefore, could be brewed more effectively.

Erlina finished stirring in the powder, and sighed.

It was such a shame. Such a pleasant life she had, here in the Palace, serving charming Queen Anora. It was very unfortunate that the Empress and the King were planning to marry, and thus make said charming Queen Anora entirely redundant. The King imagined that plans were in motion to annul his marriage, and it was true that all the proper people had been informed.

However, the Empress was far too shrewd and – really, it must be said – had too much moral delicacy to marry a divorced man. His marriage must be dissolved indeed: dissolved so completely that no one would ever be able to claim that there was any impediment to their union. Charming Queen Anora must fall sick, and then go into a decline, and then die peacefully in her bed, surrounded by her grieving servants. It was a sad thing, but completely indispensable for the legitimacy of the new order. The poison the Orlesians called “inheritance powder” was tasteless, odorless, and undetectable, save for those few who knew about it.

What could seem more natural? The King would certainly accept it. That ladies sometimes went into irreversible, incomprehensible declines was a fact of life. His own mother, that doughty warrior woman Queen Rowan, had

herself faded away into death when the King was only a young child. Of course, it was known to a few in Orlais that the Queen's death was a last, exquisite piece of spite on the part of Emperor Florian. King Maric could not be assassinated, for in those days Ferelden was in such upheaval that the death of the King might have resulted in the elevation of Loghain Mac Tir. And that hard man was notoriously difficult to kill.

No, it was the Queen, the brave, heroic, strong-hearted Queen, the other power propping up an essentially weak man, who was the target. Her death plunged Maric into depression and apathy. For a great deal of his reign he had neglected both his kingdom and his son and heir.

He had completely abandoned his other son, the bastard Alistair. The Empress could hardly believe such stupidity. The boy could have been so useful to his father and brother – a support for the rightful king, a serviceable pawn in the marriage market. To throw him away in a stable!

If nothing else, a younger brother would have presented Cailan with a challenge. He would have had a rival to keep him up to the mark. He might not have been the shallow, foolish young man who believed that the world was his to play with: The Empress had divined Cailan's character early, and had sent Erlina to Ferelden as soon as there was a Queen to spy upon.

It sometimes took decades for Shadows of the Empire to position themselves effectively. Erlina had managed it in

five years. Other nations barely knew of their existence. She had seen a missive from the late Teyrn Cousland, warning the King of 'sleeper agents.' The Teyrn of Highever had been a clever man, she admitted, a charming, amiable, *clever* man, and he had uncovered something of the truth. Too much, indeed, for him to be allowed to live.

That arrogant bard had transmitted the order for the Queen's death – the order that Erlina had hoped would never come – the last time she visited the Palace. Nothing was to be left to chance. Marjolaine, afterwards, had left Denerim to convey the King's signed marriage contract to the Empress. Even with the country in turmoil, she should be in Val Royeaux within three weeks. In another three, she should be back with the Empress' agreement. And by then, the King would conveniently be a widower. After a respectful – but brief – period of mourning, the King would make the announcement, and the Chantry would declare its support for the union.

Who would resist them? The Queen's father, of course, would be angry, but there were ways to deal with him. Nothing was easier to arrange than death in battle. Plans were in motion for that. An honorable death, too. Erlina did not much like Teyrn Loghain: a hard-bitten, dour man who always scowled at her. He was, however, the devoted father of her kind mistress the Queen, and he would be devastated by her loss. Erlina herself thought it would be wise – even compassionate – if his heroic death took place before the

Queen's passing, but that matter was out of her hands.

Arl Teagan of Redcliffe would be loyal to his nephew. The Arl of Denerim, too, would stand by the King. Erlina made a little face, thinking of his odious son Vaughan. The things one had to endure in her position!

The Arls of West Hill and South Reach had not the wealth or power to stand alone against the coming changes. Rendon Howe was a fierce enemy of Orlais, but he was already discredited, and would soon be eliminated, allowing the King to choose a less opinionated man in his stead.

The Couslands were dead, all but the brave and pleasant son, and the daughter who no longer mattered politically. A rumor had come to Erlina that the Crows had tried to assassinate Fergus Cousland. He had fought them off, and now the Crows were reassessing the feasibility of the contract. In a Ferelden weakened by Blight and by the loss of so many leaders at once, the young teyrn might be persuaded to accept the union of Orlais and Ferelden. Erlina hoped so. She rather liked him. Perhaps the Empress, in order to encourage his submission, would marry him to a charming lady of high birth, great wealth, and undoubted loyalty. Soft diplomacy was sometimes the most effective.

She poured a cup of the poisoned tea for the Queen, who was looking quite ill, poor thing: face drawn, grey smudges under the eyes. She had lost appetite, and regarded her sandwich and cookies with no interest whatever. Erlina was sorry that the Queen's suffering must be prolonged to

make the story of natural death plausible.

"Thank you, Erlina," Anora said, sipping her tea thirstily. "This is delicious."

Erlina smiled, and discreetly smoothed the Queen's hair. "Be sure to drink it all, Majesty. It is the best thing for you."



ANORA THERIN, QUEEN OF FERELDEN

CHAPTER 8



THE MOURNING BRIDE

HERE WAS SIMPLY TOO MUCH TO DO, AND NOT ENOUGH TIME. Not enough time. Bronwyn needed to go north, and would

likely be on her way the day after tomorrow. The party she was choosing to accompany her was something of a headache. She sat down at the work table with Alistair, and went over her list with him.

First things first. "Find Danith, and give her a riding lesson. If there is time for a rest break, give her two. I must take her with me to the other Dalish camp, and I need to be able to move quickly."

"I wish I could go," Alistair sighed. "Teyrn Loghain won't be all butterflies and rainbows to deal with."

She laughed then, at the image of dainty butterflies winging around Loghain's stony face. "I think it will be good for you, Alistair. You're a fine Warden and a splendid warrior. You know what the Wardens can do, and how we can be useful. We have enough Wardens now to take turns scouting. Stand up for yourself and tell him the

truth. Believe it or not, that's what he likes best."

"Maybe he likes it from *you*," Alistair muttered, scratching his head. "Me, on the other hand..."

Bronwyn gave it some thought. "Obviously, I'm not telling you to contradict him in public, standing in the middle of the camp, and speaking as loudly as possible. However, when he asks your opinion, or when he *should* be asking your opinion, don't tell him what you think he wants to hear. Tell him the truth, even if he glares. That's his default expression, anyway. It doesn't mean he's angry. It could mean that he's thinking, or that you've surprised him, or that he wishes you weren't right, or even that it's his special time of day to glare."

Alistair chuckled a little, and blew out a breath, a little overwhelmed. Knight-Commander Killian had glared all the time, too. Alistair had become rather good at interpreting the man's repertory of glares. Maybe he could manage the same feat with Teyrn Loghain.

"Who are you taking with you besides Danith?" he asked, resigned to his dreadful fate.

"Tara. She did very well on the last mission. I think... Jowan, too. It might be better to get him away from Cullen."

"Me, too," Alistair growled. "Watch him, Bronwyn. He's no good. And speaking of no good, are you going to take Zevran again?"

"I think so. He heard that I was going north, and reminded me that he is *my* sworn man, not the Grey Wardens."

"Well... watch him, too!"

She laughed, and squeezed his arm, making him blush a little. "I'll be the soul of prudence and discretion!" She leaned in and spoke softly. "I'm not just going to the Dalish, Alistair. I'm going to Denerim first, with a private message from the Teyrn to the Queen. Don't tell anyone else, but you need to know. I'll see the King of course, and try to persuade him to come and greet the elves. It might raise morale if he were here."

"Maybe," he agreed. A brief silence, followed by a sly smile. "I have some news for you, too. I think I've found us another Warden!"

"Someone who *wants* to be a Warden?" Her tone made clear how peculiar she thought that aspiration.

Alistair was a little offended. "Lots of people want to be Wardens!" He added lamely, "Not a lot of people *here*, I know, but still..."

"Is he any good?"

"Not bad at all," Alistair said more cheerfully. "Cullen tried him out on greatsword, which is the lad's chosen weapon. He's from Lothing, and saw us the first time we went through. That's what gave him the idea. He's got some skills."

"He's from Lothing? Why didn't we see him there at the muster?"

"Well, he's pretty young. His mother kept him out of it, he said. It sounds like there's a sickly sister at home. He got fed up and came south to join the King's Army. Even if his mother comes after him, she won't be able to do anything about it."

His sergeant thinks a lot of him. There was even talk about transferring him into Maric's Shield. He's that good."

Bronwyn frowned at the idea of recruiting a young boy with his whole life ahead of him into the Wardens. A nice, *normal* boy, with a mother, too: not a spy or a condemned criminal, not someone out of options, with all other doors closed to him.

"I want you to understand, Alistair, that if there weren't a Blight to be dealt with, I would never accept him. It seems so cruel."

"Being a Warden is great!"

He would never understand her, and she would never understand him.

"Being a Warden is a great *sacrifice*. He could die, Alistair! We've been very lucky so far with Joinings, but that's bound to end some time. Even if he survives, it means giving up his family and his land and his future children and spending his comparatively short life fighting monsters. And he can't change his mind later, when he knows better."

Alistair shrugged. "I never had a family anyway, so I don't miss it. They tried to make me a Templar, and believe me, that's a lot worse!" He looked at her with brown puppy-dog eyes. "He'd really like to meet you."

"I daresay." Bronwyn rubbed the back of her neck, feeling a headache coming on. "I'll speak to the lad. What's his name?"

"Carver Hawke."

"I suppose I'd better talk to him."

"Er — he's here. I told him to wait outside."

When Bronwyn repeated her reservations to young

Hawke, he was unmoved. He was everything she had feared: young, good-looking, innocent, in teenage rebellion against a loving family, and blind to the awful truth about the Wardens.

"I'm sick of my family!" he stormed. "I've given up everything for them. I've done enough!"

"And just how old are you?" Bronwyn asked, a hint of frost in her voice, "and what exactly have you given up?"

He scuffed on the stones with the toe of his boot, frowning. He did not want to tell her, or could not. Finally, he said, "We had to protect my sister. She's... not like other girls. She stays home a lot. I could never bring my friends there."

Bronwyn asked mildly, "Your sister has recovered, then? She no longer requires your protection?"

Carver Hawke gestured a quick, hot, denial. "She'll *never* be all right! Why should I have to give up my whole life because of *her* problems?"

"I assure you," Bronwyn said grimly, "that if you become a Warden, you will be giving up a great deal more than not being able to invite your friends to your house!"

"I *want* to be a Grey Warden!" young Hawke sulked. "A Grey Warden is *somebody!*"

There was no doubt that they needed more Wardens. How were they to kill that monstrous Archdemon otherwise? Her nightmares were acute, frustrating: populated with the irresistible Horde and a pathetically small force of Wardens.

"Very well," Bronwyn considered. "I will speak to your

commander. If he is amenable, we will take you on as a recruit. You will accompany us on some missions, and we shall see how you shape up."

He had a beautiful smile. He was absolutely radiant, poor boy, at the idea of Joining them. She sent him on his way, and then talked it over with Alistair.

"If he turns out all right, have him Join when out in the Wilds on a mission with only Wardens. If he dies, it will be easier to cover it up."

"Right." Alistair saw the sense in that. Bringing the necessary items for a Joining was not that difficult, after all. They went on with the day's business. Bronwyn ticked off yet another item on her list.

"I don't want Adaia going back and forth to the workshop alone," she said. "Now that she really is a recruit, we owe it to her to see to her safety. I don't trust Vaughan to leave her alone, but you never heard me say that."

Alistair frowned and fidgeted, looking over her shoulder at her notes. Bronwyn had suspected he was unhappy with the situation. "I don't see how you could coddle that — that — man," he complained. "How could you let him call Adaia those filthy names?"

Exasperated, Bronwyn threw up her hands. "What would you have me do? Draw my sword and run him through in front of Teyrn Loghain and the entire army? That would certainly win friends for the Grey Wardens! Shout him down and permanently antagonize not only him, but his father,

the Arl of Denerim? We have to work with him, Alistair! We have to work with all sorts of people we may not like. We can't simply take our toys and walk away because some of the powerful nobles of Ferelden are not the nicest people!"

"I've heard rumors about Bann Vaughan," Alistair muttered. "Adaia should have had a chance to defend herself."

"I defended Adaia!" Bronwyn said impatiently. "Has she been imprisoned, or executed, or rendered over to Vaughan for rape? No. Nothing she could have said would have made a particle of difference to that man. Alistair, he has the law on his side! It doesn't matter if it's a bad law, or an unfair one. All I could do is trump Ferelden law with the ancient rights of the Wardens, which made any crime of hers irrelevant."

"It's not irrelevant to Adaia," Alistair pointed out. "She should have a chance to defend herself to you."

Bronwyn frowned, thinking. It truly did not much matter to her what Adaia had done. She could well imagine that the odious Vaughan had provoked the girl in some way, and she had tried to defend herself. Unfortunately, while common Fereldans had the right of self-defense in theory, it could be a very murky matter when defending themselves against their rightful lord... or the lord's son and heir.

Still, she admitted to herself, if she were accused of serious crimes and there were mitigating circumstances, she would want to clear the air, so her comrades would not think so ill of her.

"You're right," she decided. "Fetch Adaia from the work-

shop yourself, and bring her here to me before supper tonight. Tell her I want to hear her side of the story, and that she can have anyone else here she wishes. Or no one else, if she prefers. And if she really doesn't want to tell me, that's her decision, and I won't hold it against her."

Adaia did indeed want to tell her what happened in her own words, with Tara on one side and Danith on the other. She muttered permission for Alistair to stay and hear as well. Bronwyn did not want this to seem like a trial, and so invited the girl to sit down at the table with her. Nonetheless, there was tension in the air, and the girl sat on the opposite side, seemingly afraid to look her in the eye.

"I just want to give you the opportunity to defend yourself against Bann Vaughan's accusations, Adaia," Bronwyn said mildly. "But it's not a matter for punishment. Alistair has declared you a recruit, and that will not change, no matter what you say today. You are one of us. We thought you would feel better, though, if we made clear that we do not necessarily believe everything Bann Vaughan said."

Adaia mumbled something. Tara whispered to her to speak up. Danith regarded her gravely. Adaia cleared her throat, and croaked, "m not a whore. He called me that, but I'm not. I'm not a whore."

"Why don't you start at the beginning?" Tara suggested, "Tell Bronwyn what happened the day Vaughan came to the Alienage."

"It wasn't the first time," Adaia said bitterly. "He comes there a lot, and usually we run and hide. I couldn't run that day, because I was getting married."

"Married?" Bronwyn sat up straight, and exchanged surprised glances with Alistair. "You are *married*?"

"Almost," Adaia muttered. Tara gave her an encouraging look. "It was my wedding day. I was all dressed up, 'cos it was my wedding day. Washed my hair and everything. Put on perfume. Pretty stupid, huh? All it did was make me a target."

Bronwyn began to realize that this was going to be much worse than anything she had imagined.

"Go on, please," she managed.

"I'd never seen my groom before that day, of course," Adaia went on. "It was an arranged marriage, like most in the Alienage. The hahren and the rest of the elders try to keep the bloodline going, though Maker knows why. My cousin Soris was getting married, too, and neither of us was happy about it." She gave Danith a wry smile. "We even talked about running away to find the Dalish."

"I wish you had," Danith said, scowling at Bronwyn.

"We probably would have died in the forest, but it wouldn't have been worse than what actually happened. Anyway, Soris met his bride and wasn't pleased, because she wasn't really much to look at. In fact, she was the plainest elf I ever met. Not that that saved her. I feel bad about saying anything about her looks, because she was all right. Better

than me, in the end. I was a lot luckier. My groom's name was Nelaros, and he was from the Highever Alienage. He was handsome, and he seemed kind, and had a nice way of speaking. I did too, then. Would you believe that I used to be famous in the Alienage for my singing? Thought not. Anyway. Nelaros was nice, and I thought that maybe this marriage thing wouldn't be so bad. See, in the Alienage you have to be married to be considered an adult. So we got up on the platform where we have weddings and ceremonies, and the priest showed up with her Templars to protect her from scum like us – "

"Do you remember the priest's name?" Alistair asked.

"It was Mother Boann," Adaia answered instantly. "It's always Mother Boann. She's a do-gooder."

Bronwyn took note of the name, and decided to see if she could find her in Denerim.

"Anyway, we were up on the platform, so everybody in the Alienage could witness our marriages, and who should show up but Bann Vaughan and his friends, along with his guard. Mother Boann tries to tell him it's a wedding, and he says that she could dress up her pets however she liked, but it makes no difference to him. He and his friends are having a party, see, so he tells them to grab some whores for the entertainment.

"And that's what happened. Me and Soris' bride Valora, and my cousin Shianni and Nola and Lyris. I begged him just to take me and leave the others alone, but Vaughan

laughed, and said that 'wouldn't be much of a party!"

Bronwyn couldn't believe Vaughan's brazen effrontery. "He did this in front of your *father* – and all the other elves?" She found it hard to believe that a father would not defend his own daughter.

"What were they supposed to do?" Adaia challenged her. "They begged for mercy, of course, but if they had so much as raised a hand, Vaughan would have had his men slaughter everybody, and then the good people of Denerim would be proud of their Bann for keeping the peace and saving them from the vicious, rioting elves!" She added bitterly, "It's easy for Vaughan and his guards to be brave, when they've made it a crime for an elf to own a weapon!"

That was too true for debate, so Bronwyn nodded at her, wanting her to go on.

"So we were dragged away. Someone knocked me in the head, so I don't remember anything until I woke up in a locked room with the other girls. We were all really scared, and Lyris said we would just have to let them do whatever they liked. With luck, they'd let us go afterward, and then we'd go home and never, ever talk about it again."

Bronwyn was still shocked. "Has Vaughan done things like this before?"

Adaia looked at her as if she were insane. "All the time. What's to stop him?"

Bronwyn was silent. Alistair remembered how Arlessa Isolde had treated her elven maids.

Adaia shrugged. "He's something you have to look out for. There's only one law that matters in the Alienage: a human can do anything he likes to you, if you don't run fast enough. And if you resist, you and all your family will die." She thought a little more. "Lots of nobles and rich men look for girls in the Alienage, but Vaughan started early. Some men will take care of their bastards, but Vaughan won't. Elva was the first, and she tried to go to him and ask for help after he got her with child, but he threw her out, after he turned her over to the men in the guardhouse first."

"Did she... lose... the child?" Bronwyn asked.

Adaia shook her head. "That was probably what he wanted, but no, she wasn't that lucky. She had the baby all right, and her family made her do the sensible thing. She left it at the Chantry door. When humans and elves produce a child, the child always comes out human – shemlen. That means 'quickling' in the old Elvish tongue, because in ancient times elves were immortal, and humans so short-lived. It would be insane to raise a human-looking child in the Alienage, and the elders wouldn't put up with it, anyway. So Elva gave her child to the Chantry to raise, and her family found an older man who was looking for a second wife. She's pretty bitter."

Danith frowned, nodding. It made perfect sense to give shemlen children to the shemlens. Keeping them in the Alienage would simply further thin to nothing what little remained of elven blood there. That the shemlen lord was

a tyrant was nothing more than she expected, but she could see that the Commander was disturbed by this: being a young woman, it was possible that she had been sheltered from such things, by whatever sense of decency shemlen males could command.

Tara fidgeted in her chair, growing ever more angry. Either it was the Chantry persecuting mages, or it was some bullying human noble persecuting elves. Bronwyn clearly had no idea how bad it was in an Alienage. She had mentioned that there was an Alienage in her own town of Highever, but she probably never went there. On the other hand, it was impossible to believe that Bronwyn's brother, the handsome and gallant Teyrn Fergus, who had spoken to them all so politely, could ever behave like that monster Vaughan. He had defended Adaia, after all, and had asked nothing of her in return. It would not be fair to judge all humans to be the same, when Tara's own experience showed her that it was simply not so.

"So you were knocked out and dragged away..." Tara prompted Adaia, wanting to get back to the girl's story.

"Right." Adaia was still a moment, reliving the memory. "So Shianni told me we were at the Arl of Denerim's estate, locked up in a room near the kitchen. Vaughan was hardly going to drag us in through the front door, after all. Even as prisoners, we were only good enough for the servants' entrance." She managed a brief, halfhearted chuckle. Alistair understood exactly how she felt.

Adaia said, "Nola was babbling prayers to the Maker. Like *that* was going to help... Anyway, some guards showed up to take us to the 'party.' Nola started crying, and told them they couldn't do this to us. So they killed her."

Bronwyn stared. "Killed her? For crying and praying?"

"Yup. Cut her open like a pig. They told us that was what happened to knife-eared whores who didn't shut up. After the first few screams, it shut us up, all right. We were too scared to make a sound."

"None of you were armed?" Danith broke in. "You could not fight these shemlens?"

Adaia rolled her eyes. "Of course we weren't armed! It's illegal for elves to have weapons. You can be killed on sight for carrying a sword or a bow. Besides, we were dressed up for a wedding. A wedding! That meant fancy dresses, and no place to hide a knife. We weren't expecting to have to go into battle!"

Bronwyn said quietly, "But you did fight, eventually."

"I had to!" Adaia burst out hoarsely. "When someone's trying to kill you, you fight! You have to! Even an animal fights when someone comes to kill it."

Scout looked up at her quizzically, from where he was sprawled on the floor.

Adaia looked right back at him. "I *know*," she said, "everybody knows about mabaris. I mean regular animals like cats and mice, not warrior animals like you. I wish you'd been there. You'd have shown them," she muttered.

"We've got dogs in the Alienage, but they're nothing like Scout. Of course, we couldn't have afforded to feed a dog as big as him either."

That was probably true, Scout allowed. He subsided, and lay back down at Bronwyn's feet.

"So they took Shianni and Valora and Lyris. They left me for later, they said. Bann's orders. I guess he had something special planned for me. A couple of the guards stayed behind, looking Nola over. One of them said she was still warm, and asked the other how particular he was. But they left and followed the others, so I guess they were just making a sick joke. They locked me in again, just me and Nola, and I sat there while time passed, and the flies buzzed. I wanted to cover Nola with something, but there was nothing in the room to do it with. I had to move away from her, because there was a lot of blood, and it got black and sticky after a while. I closed her eyes, anyway."

She fidgeted on the bench, unsure how much to tell. It would be terrible if the elven servants who had helped her got into trouble. Looking stupid and saying "*I don't know, master*," only got you so far.

"Then I heard the door being unlocked. It was my cousin Soris. He had friends who worked in the kitchens, and they let him in through the servants' entrance. He told me that Nelaros was with him, and had gone ahead to check things out. Soris had knives, and gave me one. We wanted to see if we could get to Shianni and the others and help them escape.

I was so scared, but I couldn't just run away. The cook — he was a human — saw us and started shouting. So we killed him." She glared defiantly at Bronwyn, and ducked her head.

She went on: "The servants — the other elves — made themselves scarce. We could get as far as we did because there weren't as many guards as usual. The old Arl had taken a bunch of them when he went south. We didn't know where to go, so we just went from room to room, with our heads down, trying not to be seen. Sometimes that worked. We were just elves, after all, and most people thought we were servants."

She was not going to tell Bronwyn and Alistair about the sleeping, off-duty guardsmen she had killed on impulse. It had felt right, but humans might not see it that way. She had taken everything they had, too, and it had made her feel a little bit better.

"We got to a big room where the guardsmen had their meals — the mess hall — " she said, using the term she had learned here at Ostagar. "Some guards had spotted Nelaros, and knew he didn't belong, and I guess he said something they didn't like, because one of them ran him through. Soris and I rushed at them, and I stabbed one in the back, before he even knew I was there. There were only three of them, and I was so angry that they were dead before I knew it. All I could see was Nelaros, bleeding to death. He was there to save me, and he'd never even seen me before that morning."

She wiped her nose. "He was dying. There wasn't anything I could do. He smiled at me, sort of — he was gritting his teeth against the pain, too. He dug into his pocket and pulled out a ring. It was my wedding ring. He wanted me to have it." She put out her hand, and showed them a thin silver band. "Then blood came out of his mouth and he was dead."

There was a long silence. Bronwyn waited for the girl to go on. After a few moments of thought, she did.

"It seemed stupid to go so far and for Nelaros to be killed, and then run away. So we went on. We had blood on us, and I felt like everybody could see me. We found a long hall, and opened all the doors. Sometimes we had to fight. At the end," she sighed, remembering that awful moment, "we opened the wrong door. Or the right door. I don't know. This big guardsman in armor rushed out at us. We had picked up some better weapons by then, but of course all the armor we found was too big. The guard knocked me down and hacked at Soris — " another pause. "and I jumped on his back, and cut his throat. But it was too late."

"Soris died?" Tara asked softly.

"His head was almost off," Adasia whispered, hardly daring to believe it. "Almost off. And after all that, I couldn't go any farther. I got into the room he was guarding. Through the door to the next room I could hear Shianni screaming and the men laughing. I don't think they even heard the fight outside, they were making so much noise. And the door was locked. I tried to open it, but it was locked. I sat on the

stone floor and cried. I could have pounded on the door, and they might have opened, but there were four of them and just one of me, and Soris was dead."

Tara put an arm around her. Danith was silent, thinking of Tamlen, lost in a dark cavern: Tamlen, whom she would never see again, whose fate she would never know. Alistair looked at Bronwyn in helpless indignation.

"Thirsty," Adaia croaked. Tara poured her a cup of ale, and the girl drank it down, clearing her throat. "So I left," she said. "I'd come so far, but I left with my tail between my legs. I walked out the way I came, and a guard caught me. He had been in the dungeons, and came up and found the bodies. He saw the blood on me. He hit me with the pommel of his knife — " she touched the side of her head, "and he hit me again and again, and he dragged me into his room. I tried to fight, but he started choking me."

She would not tell them all that happened. She would never tell anyone about the stuffy room, and the horribly strong shem grunting on top of her. "I couldn't breathe," she whispered. "I felt something pop in my throat. I got hold of his dagger and I stabbed him in the side of the neck. We fought a long time. I got hurt, but he died. There was water in the room. I cleaned myself up, and then I ran. I ran all the way home, and I went down into the cellar and curled up and never wanted to go anywhere else. My voice has been wrong ever since."

Tara said, "Shianni survived. We saw her in Denerim."

"Yeah, she survived. After she passed out, they forgot about her. She staggered home with Lyris a few days later. They were in bad shape. Nobody's ever going to marry them now. Valora died. They tried to make her do something so awful that she bit Vaughan and cut his face with a broken bottle. So they tortured her to death and hung her naked body outside the estate as a warning. We don't know what they did with Nola. Probably threw her away in a midden somewhere, or in the river."

Bronwyn wanted a drink herself. All of this had triggered memories of the night of blood and death at Highever Castle. Had Mother died fighting, or had she been taken prisoner? What would Howe have done to her, when she was at his mercy? What would he have done to Bronwyn herself? She got up and walked away, looking out the window, willing her hands not to shake, as she tried to pour herself some ale. Alistair followed, and poured it for her. Vaughan needed to die, he decided, but how could it be done without hurting the Wardens?

Tara fought off the nausea at memories of anonymous Templars. She knew what it was like to think that you were dying. Things were never the same after. The world was never the same after. She hugged Adaia with one arm, while watching Bronwyn pace back and forth.

She whispered to the other girls, "Bronwyn's family was murdered before she became a Grey Warden. All but her and her brother."

Danith had been told that before, and had not been much moved. The Commander was decent, for a shemlen, but the deaths of her shemlen family meant little to Danith. Still, knowing what had befallen her was reason to hope she might have some compassion for the sufferings of the city elf.

Tara's words only annoyed Adaia. What did she care? She was talking about Soris and Shianni, and there was no room for anyone else. Angry as she was, she did get the message that Tara thought that Lady Bronwyn would understand what it was to lose family.

Bronwyn got herself under control, thinking of the smug and smarmy Vaughan, and how she had smiled at him the night before. How many men – noblemen of Ferelden – were just like him? How many raped and killed as they liked, with no one to call their power to account? It was as bad as the Orlesians. In fact, it was *exactly* like the worst Orlesians, with not a pin to choose between them. How many noble sons had she danced with, and hunted with, and smiled and chatted with, who had gone home to terrified servant girls, or innocents dragged off the streets? Surely Fergus would never...?

Her breathing slowed. No, she was sure of Fergus. He did not hurt people because he could. The servants had never gossiped about him. He had never hurt Oriana by looking at another woman after they were married. Anyone else, though... She thought of drunken, silly Thomas Howe, and

was once again glad, glad, a *thousand* times glad that she had not allowed herself to be talked into a marriage with him.

But there was nothing she could do about Vaughan at the moment. She would be gone in a day or two, and must rely on Alistair to keep Adaia safe. Nor could she challenge Vaughan, even had she had the time. The army must be united against the darkspawn. They needed the Arl of Denerim's troops. Highever was in contention, and Fergus needed the Arl of Denerim's vote in the Landsmeet. Vaughan's, too, for that matter. She must be careful and cunning, and keep her people safe: smiling at Vaughan while loathing him in her heart. It was a disgusting double game, and the idea of it made her feel dirty. For the moment, she could see no other choice.

She finally turned to the others and said, "Adaia, I'm glad that you honor the sacrifice of Nelaros by wearing his ring. It does you credit. I don't want to you go about the camp alone. Vaughan is just the sort to feel he's been robbed of his prey. Always have someone with you coming and going to your workshop. I've talked to Alistair about that."

"Right," he seconded her fiercely. "We'll stand by you. There's always someone in the workshop, so wait until one of us comes for you in the afternoon. You're one of us, now."

Bronwyn nodded her approval. "Vaughan has been told to leave you alone. He doesn't want to offend me, so if he tries anything, it would be by stealth. You must all keep your eyes open."

With a hint of truculence, Adaia croaked, "You don't want to ask if I stole anything?"

"No," Bronwyn said briefly. "Of course you picked up weapons when you were fighting. Everyone does that. I know that Vaughan was lying when he claimed that what you had stolen amounted to a sovereign! He knew it would be impossible to prove otherwise." She took another sip of ale, and resumed her pacing.

So Adaia said nothing about the necklace she had found in one of the rooms they had gone into when they were searching for Shianni. Or about the gold ring the big guardsmen had been wearing. The ring had only brought a few silvers at Alarith's shop, since both the merchant and Father knew it was stolen, but those silvers had been welcome. The necklace had brought nothing. It was still hidden in the cellar. Someday it might be safe to sell it. It might bring in quite a bit of silver, since it had a glittering red stone in it.

"I've killed, but I'm not a whore," Adaia repeated, a little fiercely.

"Of course you're not!" Bronwyn said impatiently. "That's something rotten men call any woman who gets in their way. I've been called a whore myself, generally by men I killed a few seconds later."

"That's true," Alistair agreed, a little cheered at the thought.

Danith said stiffly, "We do not have whores or whoring among the Dalish, nor do our men call women by such names. And rape is very rare, and punished harshly."

Bronwyn bit back something she would have regretted. Tara said tactfully, "That's very civilized. I've been called a whore, too, when I was a prisoner. It's also what some men call women when they want to give themselves a excuse why it's all right to attack them. Some men feel that a whore cannot be raped."

"That is a *ridiculous* notion," Danith declared. "Only a sh – a brute could believe that." Perhaps it would not be appropriate to accuse the shemlens to the Commander's face. And for all she knew, perhaps the city flat-ears and the dwarves practiced rape, as well. She eyed the big shemlen male accusingly.

Alistair looked at them, feeling harassed. Why were these women were glaring at *him*? "I've never done anything like that. Grey Wardens don't. We respect women. If we're men. And women respect... men. And themselves. Anyway, of course it's ridiculous!"

"Ridiculous or not," Bronwyn said, "we must accept the reality that some people think that way. Therefore, we must be watchful. This does not hold for only elves, by the way. Morrigan, has also been accosted here in camp, the last time we were here. I shall speak to the other women among our companions. However, Adaia, you are in particular peril, because you have a personal enemy. Be on your guard, and most importantly, do not allow yourself to be *alone*."

"If Bronwyn won't go for it, you *know* Alistair won't."

Anders lay facing Morrigan on their cot, stroking her back. It was a quiet moment, a moment to be cherished; and he was reluctant to get up, leave their enchanted privacy, and venture into the cacophony of Ostagar. His old friends from the Circle – and even some who had never been friends – all wanted to meet Morrigan, and talk to Morrigan, and learn all about a mage who had not needed the imprisonment in the Circle to learn her skills. On her own, she had remained both free of the Templars and demonic possession. Her very existence was a rebuke to the heavy hand of the Chantry. And no maleficar she: Morrigan regarded Blood Magic with contempt, as a shortcut seized upon out of magical weakness.

She was decent enough to Jowan, which rather surprised Anders; but it was true that while Jowan was a Blood Mage, he had proved himself an independent thinker, who had boldly cast off the authority of the Circle. Furthermore, he had survived on his own. Even Morrigan acknowledged that his first days outside the Circle he had known all his life must have been bewildering.

Jowan really was not such a weak mage, when Anders looked at it critically. He had fought very effectively in that battle to defend the refugees. He lacked confidence, certainly. Perhaps that was the root of his problem. He had been a late bloomer, and his instructors at the Circle were merciless. His fellow apprentices, too, had been relentless in their teasing. He had clung to his only friend, Tara, who

in contrast had been a prodigy from an early age. Anders supposed that measuring himself against her would have been an exercise in humiliation for Jowan in those first years, and something he had never quite got over.

If Morrigan were to be protected, they would need all the mages – all their little company, in fact – to work together. Perhaps Bronwyn would see it from that angle. She was friendly with Morrigan, and Morrigan actually seemed to like her and respect the young noblewoman – at least, as much as Morrigan liked or respected anybody. Yes. Morrigan was in danger. Morrigan was a comrade. Bronwyn was certainly one to stand by her comrades. But if they were to get her approval, they would have to talk to her immediately. Bronwyn was talking about going north to find that other Dalish clan, and would be leaving soon.

"Let's go talk to her tonight," Anders suggested, "Show her the book. Tell her Flemeth's plan."

"Flemeth rescued her brother. Perhaps Bronwyn feels a debt to her for that. She is unlikely to turn on one she regards as a benefactor."

"But she didn't *like* Flemeth. You said they looked like they were quarreling when they were out of earshot."

"*Like?*" Morrigan laughed, a whispery, throaty sound, her breath tickling his lips enticingly. "Well, no. Of course not. No one could *like* Flemeth: someone like Bronwyn least of all. However, she is just the sort to feel bound by duty and obligation and the rest of that tiresome rubbish."

"Then we have to give her really good reasons to look beyond that. Your danger is certainly a good reason. We need her to *want* to kill Flemeth. What, besides protecting you, could Flemeth's death do for Bronwyn?"

Morrigan paused, her hand resting on Anders' warm and well-formed shoulder. He really was a *very* comely man, by the far the most agreeable she had ever known. Sometimes she thought that it might be pleasant to remain in company with him indefinitely...

But he must not know the reason that Flemeth had manipulated Morrigan's placement amongst the Wardens. He must never know. The Old God Reborn was the great goal. To be the mother to such a God was her destiny. Anders was merely the tool, an essential tool in that endeavor. If he failed her, there were others who could be cozened or beguiled. Her mind, reluctantly, slid to Jowan — a poor second to Anders indeed, and then, with even more reluctance, to Cullen and Alistair. She would do as she must, in the end. She took her herbal tea regularly, protecting her from a premature conception that would ruin everything.

And it was for their own good, after all. Morrigan would save them, even if they never knew what she had done. The Old God would be preserved from the Taint, and Bronwyn would survive, and perhaps even marry that irascible, middle-aged hero with whom she was incomprehensibly in love. Tara would survive, and become the Senior Mage Warden she aspired to be. Those two were

the only women friends Morrigan had ever had, and she confessed to a sentimental wish that they not die in slaying the Archdemon. They were very much at risk, as they were outstanding fighters and likely to take their responsibility seriously — unlike *some*.

And Anders... Flemeth's plan demanded that Morrigan leave the party and seek solitude before delivering the Child, but Morrigan was inclined now to think that was simply Flemeth making things easy for herself. Flemeth, it now was clear, had not told her everything — or even the most important things. It was hideously possible that once Morrigan had suffered pregnancy and labor, and perhaps had cared for the Child through its exasperating first year, that Flemeth planned to make an appearance and take Morrigan's body and the Child for herself.

Perhaps it would be wise to keep Anders about. Even if he sensed something odd in her, he might think it had come from him, and would continue to help and protect her. Perhaps the other Wardens would feel the same. The Wardens sensed Taint, but they would not sense an untainted God Child. She hoped.

But it was best to be rid of Flemeth now, and not live in fear. How could she forge the Wardens into a weapon to strike at her mortal enemy?

"There *is* something Flemeth can offer Bronwyn..." she murmured. She smiled darkly at Anders.

"Practice."

Rumor in Denerim had it that the Queen was pregnant. That was the word on the street, Fergus was informed of this by the seneschal of Highever House. The man actually begged the teyrn to confirm it, hope brightening his eyes. The servants paused at their work, leaning in, longing for the happy news. Fergus told them the truth: that the Queen was unwell, and not expecting; and he was sorry for their disappointment. He was sorry for his own, for that matter. If the Queen were to produce a child, it would put paid to the King's flirtation with Orlais. Surely the Divine would not countenance dissolving a fruitful marriage?

But there was no child, nor did there seem to be any prospect of one, with the Queen unwell and the King making hay with his mistresses. Nor were any of said mistresses pregnant. Even a bastard would have been *something*, but to Fergus' knowledge, the King had never sired a child. It was unlikely he would do so on Empress Celene, either, though that was probably not going to prevent her from giving birth to an heir she would attribute to Cailan. There were all sorts of stratagems available to an unscrupulous woman. It spoke well for Queen Anora's character that she had not taken recourse to any of them.

At last, the King had given his leave for Fergus to march on Amaranthine. The Queen had not been present at the Council meeting, but Fergus had decided to pay a courtesy call on her before departing, if she was well enough to receive him.

It bothered him that the King did not seem worried about his wife's condition, when she had been ill for over a week. Fergus thought it would be appropriate to take the Queen a gift – some little thing to lift her spirits.

Useless to try to give her flowers: the Palace boasted the finest garden in Denerim. There was no time to visit the shops, so he poked through the chests and closets of Highever House. There was quite a bit here, though of course they had carted most of their belongings back and forth between Highever Castle and the city estate...

"Who is it, Erlina?" asked a soft, weary voice.

"Do not distress yourself, Majesty. He is going," the maid crooned.

"Who *is* it?"

"It is the Teyrn of Highever, Majesty," Erlina replied, in a more subdued tone.

"I want to see him. Send him in. Do not contradict me."

Fergus had heard she was not well, but her condition looked serious to him. Perhaps it seemed more so since he had not seen her in a week. The Queen was ghostly pale, and had noticeably lost weight.

"Come to gather intelligence for the rest of the Landsmeet?" she asked. Her tone was ironic, and just the least bit defensive.

"I have come to wish you in better health, Your Majesty," Fergus replied gravely. "And to give you a present."

That merited a little interest from her, and he held the

anonymous object, wrapped in a piece of lavender silk, in his outstretched left hand. With his right hand, he whisked the silk away.

It was a little glass music box, Tranquil-made, enchanted to play "Princess on the Glass Hill," whenever the rune was touched. Inside, a little princess with braids of real gold sat on a throne, holding a rose. It was a piece of nonsense, of course, as Oriana had said, finding it a bit unsophisticated and very *Fereldan*. She had kept it at Highever House, purely to please him, he knew. It was hardly his fault that she had not grown up with the story.

It was a silly trifle, and Fergus was beginning to feel a hint of embarrassment, when Anora said, "How charming! Let me see it, my lord."

He showed her where to touch it, and she smiled a little, listening to the faint crystalline tune.

"I shall put it here on the table. How kind of you, my lord, to think of something to divert me. Sit, I pray you. I was about to have tea. Would you not join me? Erlina," she raised her voice slightly, "The Teyrn will stay for tea. Make enough for two today. Now, my lord," she said to Fergus, "tell me how you plan to approach Vigil's Keep."

"Of course, Your Majesty."

The maid left the room and sighed, emptying the contents of the pretty Orlesian pot into the slop jar and rinsing it carefully. She would have to brew it all over again, without the powder. It would raise more questions than

she could answer, were the Teyrn to sicken, too. These things always took longer than one planned...



FERGUS COUSLAND, TEYRN OF HIGHEVER



VIGIL'S KEEP



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CHAPTER 9

ASHA'BELLANAR



OR MONTHS, VIGIL'S

KEEP HAD BEEN ON ALERT, LIKE A BEAST ABOUT TO SPRING. Gold had flowed in and then out, and the forces of the Arl of Amaranthine had never been so numerous, or so superbly equipped.

"Message for the Arl!" shouted the horseman. The gate guard recognized him, and let him through, but the guard at the inner courtyard demanded the password as well.

"Avvar!" the horseman snapped. "Don't delay me! His lordship will flay you if you keep this news from him." He jumped down, right leg flicking over the horse's neck, and hurried through the throne room.

"Where is he?" he asked the seneschal, not even pausing to shed his wet cloak.

"His study. Follow me."

Eyes followed the courier. Soldiers nudged one another, wondering if they would finally get the order to do something other than wait. Rendon Howe's troops were prey to dozens of rumors: that the King would march on them

and put everyone in Vigil's Keep to the sword; that the Arl would march on Denerim and defend the King and Queen from the Cousland conspiracy; that Teyrn Loghain was coming to join them, or to mediate the differences between the Crown and the Arl; that the so-called "darkspawn" were really Orlesians in disguise; that the darkspawn were real, but were controlled by the mages at the Circle; that Fergus Cousland would send Crow assassins against the Arl and his family.

Howe was widely respected, but not loved, so there were other rumors: that the Couslands had been innocent of treason, and the attack on them had been an attempt to seize by force what the Arl had not been able to win by marriage; that the Arl had hoped to keep secret his own part in the attack, and blame it on rogue mercenaries; that the Teyrna of Highever was a prisoner in the deepest dungeons, and visited regularly by the Arl; that the Arl had sent for his eldest child, Lord Nathaniel, and was planning to marry him to the old Teyrn's daughter to make peace; that the old Teyrn's daughter was now the famous Girl Warden, fighting to save Ferelden from the darkspawn; that the Girl Warden was a dangerous siren who had seduced Teyrn Loghain, or King Cailan, or the new Dwarven King, or the Knight-Commander of the Templars – or all of them at various times.

Up the stairs and down a hall were the Arl's private quarters. It was not very far from the Throne Room, in fact. The

courier had served Arl Howe for many years, and knew that the late Arlessa's rooms were in a distant tower, so as to be as far from the Arl as possible. The Arl's daughter had taken over those rooms after her mother died. The Arl approved of that, wanting her protected from danger and from rough-tongued soldiers. The heir, Lord Thomas, had a fine bedchamber near his father, but preferred to sleep in the knights' quarters: drinking, most of the time, it was said.

The seneschal announced him, and the courier was shown in. There was the Arl, at work at his desk, looking over some maps with his faithful right-hand, Captain Chase.

"Ah, Catesby," Rendon Howe turned cold grey eyes on the messenger. "What news from Denerim?"

A little later, a pair of guardsmen were called to the Arl's study. The seneschal was grim and non-committal, and instructed the men to take the dead body of the courier to the common midden for disposal.

"Andraste's tits," grunted one. "Remind me never to give the Old Man news he don't like!"

Useless fools. Rendon Howe stormed down to the armory, cursing quietly and thoroughly. *I am surrounded by fools.*

Catesby had not seen Marjolaine in Denerim. No one answered the door. It was believed that she had gone a long journey. Wherever she had gone, it was not north to report to her employer. Where the bloody Maker was the woman? Howe had not heard from her since her last message, advis-

ing him to wait for Fergus Cousland's arrest. That, apparently, was not happening any time soon. Instead, the King was on his way south to rejoin the army, and Fergus Cousland had been given leave to seek revenge. Catesby had left the advancing troops only half a day behind.

Everything was bloody falling apart. The Crows had failed to kill either Bronwyn or Fergus. Filthy foreign cheats. And now, news had come to Denerim that the bloody Girl Warden had arrived at Ostagar at the head of an army of four thousand dwarves. If that were not bad enough, she had made contact with the Dalish, who were sending a company of archers. Bloody Bronwyn Cousland. She had given him the slip at Highever, and was as great a danger to him as her brother. The girl who had thought herself too good for Thomas was now very close in Loghain's councils, and the whispered rumor was that they were lovers.

Bryce had fed him some codswallop about her being *in love*, as an excuse to refuse the Howe alliance. Well, she must have got over being *in love* quick smart, if she was bartering herself to Loghain. At that, she was showing more sense than he had anticipated. He should have remembered how talented Couslands were at ingratiating themselves with those in power. He had occasionally wondered if Bryce would try for a marriage alliance there, but had dismissed it, knowing how disinclined Loghain was to match himself to a highborn, high-maintenance bride. Bronwyn's tomboy antics must have amused Loghain, or

recalled happier days to him. The girl did resemble Queen Rowan slightly, though the relationship was very distant.

And that greedy fool Vaughan had been sent to Ostagar in his father's place, thus putting an end to Howe's profitable trade in elves. Urien was too cautious an old fox to take part in such a scheme, and it was too late to deal with him, anyway.

It had been, he admitted, too good to last, but had filled the coffers of Vigil's Keep with more gold than he had seen in all the years he had ruled Amaranthine. That gold might be his only salvation now: with it he had fortified the Vigil, strengthening the walls and hiring soldiers. No ordinary force could take this fortress, and if he held out long enough, Fergus and his troops would break on the stone of the curtain walls. The darkspawn continued to be a menace in the south. If Howe could hold out long enough, he might manage to kill Fergus and wring a settlement. Now that Bronwyn was a Grey Warden, she could not inherit. Fergus' brat was dead. Once Fergus was out of the way, Thomas or Nathaniel still had a good chance of keeping Highever...

He met with the rest of his captains, and gave his orders quickly, tersely. A message to Esmerelle in Amaranthine; more messages to the Packtons and Tyrells. They were well-stocked as to victuals. He had been taking his duties from freeholders in kind instead of in coin since the profitable trade with the Tevinters had begun.

To one of his men-at-arms, he said, "Find Lady Delilah. Escort her to her rooms, and lock her in. No one goes in,

and she does not come out. Understood?"

"Yes, my lord!"

"And you —" Howe said to another soldier. "Send my son to me."

"May I speak to you in private?" Bronwyn asked Loghain softly, as dinner ended.

He smirked, half-amused. Apparently there had been some sort of foolish gossip about the two of them. Soldiers were easily bored.

"If you dare."

A dutiful smile, not concealing her vexation. Bronwyn no longer blushed so readily, but she was still quite young and still easily unsettled by his notice. It was a poignant pleasure, to realize that she was stirred by him. She must have heard the gossip, too. Naturally, a young lady felt rather differently about that sort of gossip that a man in his position. A smile rose to his lips, irresistible.

Her fine hound was lounging on the floor between them. Loghain tossed the dog a tidbit from his plate, which Scout snapped up almost without moving his head. A lazy tail-wag expressed his thanks.

She was playing with her food now, Grey Warden appetite or not, and was clearly anxious to have her say. He rose, acknowledged the salutes, and led the way to his office, her dog trotting along behind them. Waving her in, he shut the door, with a brief, hard look at the guard. He wanted no eavesdroppers, whatever Bronwyn had to tell him. The

dog found a corner and sprawled there, completely at ease.

Bronwyn took the chair he pointed her to, and was actually blushing again. He had missed that, but forbore to smile, which would make her even more uncomfortable. At some point, he must speak to her. Not now, of course, but someday, when the worst was behind them.

She began without preamble. "I've had some extraordinary news. I had planned to leave tomorrow, but perhaps I can put off my departure a day or so. My people have given me word of a dragon near to hand. And not just a dragon: a High Dragon."

Loghain frowned at her. "My scouts have given me no word of such a creature."

She looked unsurprised. "This dragon has wit enough to remain invisible, until it is sufficiently provoked. You know —" she paused, and looked at him with those piercing green eyes. He was growing used to the strange color. It was odd, but rather beautiful.

She began again. "Morrigan is a shape-shifter, taught by Flemeth, the Witch of the Wilds herself. Flemeth is also, obviously, a shape-shifter. Morrigan tells me that her most powerful form is that of a High Dragon."

He stared at her, trying to see what lay behind her eyes. "And why would Morrigan tell such a story about her mother?"

"Because Flemeth is not her mother at all. When I was riding to Denerim, Morrigan and her mage friends took advantage of my absence to penetrate the Tower of Magi

and abscond with a book that was once Flemeth's. In it, the witch reveals the secret of her long life."

He waited.

Bronwyn grimaced with distaste. She had been reluctant to strike at one who had saved her brother, but what Flemeth had planned for Morrigan — and for an infinite series of innocent girls — was unspeakable. It was reason enough to put an end to her.

"Every few decades, Flemeth abducts a girl child with the gift of magic. She raises and teaches the girl, training her magic to its fullest capacity. When that is done, she takes possession of the girl's body for herself, condemning her 'child's' soul to oblivion. So she has done since the Towers Age. Morrigan was to develop her magic with the challenges of our expedition. At some point, Flemeth planned to take the body for herself, and thus enjoy whatever rewards and benefits accrued to Morrigan for her loyalty to our company and to Ferelden."

It was an extraordinary story, indeed, but Loghain thought Flemeth capable of anything.

"I take it that Morrigan does not wish to be possessed?"

She smiled slightly. "It would seem not. I had wondered what was wrong with her for the past week. She has quietly boiled with fear and anger since she comprehended certain passages in Flemeth's grimoire. She approached me, asking for my protection. That Flemeth will almost certainly, if attacked, transform into a High Dragon would

give us the opportunity to test our tactics and weapons against a formidable opponent. Morrigan asks only that she not be present, as she fears that once dead, Flemeth would attempt to possess her on the spot. She believes that distance would be her best defense in this situation. However, I would bring all the rest of my Wardens and other companions to the fight. We might also try a ballista or two, if they can be positioned stealthily. The darkspawn, from your account, have been quiescent for several days, especially to the west. This might be our best opportunity."

"Flemeth is a powerful mage. Have you considered asking the assistance of the Templars in camp?"

"I considered, but rejected the idea. Morrigan tells me that Templars have not had much success against Flemeth in the past." The stories, in fact, were horrifying. It was hideous, what Morrigan had been forced to watch, when living with that abomination. "Alistair and Cullen, of course, have had Templar training, and possess all the usual abilities. We can see if they are useful when supported by other tactics."

Loghain considered the proposal. It was tempting: very tempting. Flemeth's malicious predictions had pursued and haunted him for years.

"If you keep him near you, he will betray you: each time worse than the last."

So she had declared to Maric. A vicious lie, of course. He had never betrayed Maric. Yes, he and Rowan had been lovers,

but only when Maric had cast Rowan aside for that treacherous elf Katriel in the most egregious, humiliating way. Rowan had needed the support and validation of Loghain's love.

As to dealing with Cailan – well, he refused to feel bound by the ridiculous prophecy or by his ties to Maric. The son was not the father, and if Cailan planned to betray Ferelden – as he so obviously did – then Loghain felt all obligation to the son was at an end.

Flemeth. There would be a real satisfaction in putting an end to that sinister creature. She would pour no more poison into men's ears: spread no more lies. And if what Bronwyn told him was true – murder no more young girls.

"Very well. We move out at dawn. We shall take my engineers and two of their portable ballistae. A company of archers, too. Perhaps some of Maric's Shield. Do you need more mages?"

"I think that would be an *excellent* idea. I wish I knew more about the tactics of the Nevarran dragon-hunters. I don't know much more than that they hunted the creatures nearly to extinction. What weapons they used... how large their hunting parties were... this is all a mystery."

Loghain grunted. He knew nothing about it either, and had never seen a book that dealt with it. It was one of those things that belonged to the distant past, right up until it didn't. "Better for a bit of overkill than to be unprepared. We'll have a surprise for Flemeth. By the way..." he paused, "I'd like to have one of your Wardens with me,

so the darkspawn don't ruin the effect. Perhaps that new mage of yours – the dark-haired one..."

"All right," Bronwyn agreed, thinking it a very reasonable precaution, and very glad he had not asked for Tara, who was a superior battlemage, or for Anders, their healer. "I'll let him know that he'll be with you."

" – and I'd like a map to Flemeth's lair, if that is possible."

Melian Tabris was guarded by one of the Grey Wardens both going and coming to her labors in the bomb workshop.

So Vaughan's man told him. It was annoying, but not surprising. Bronwyn Cousland had made a pet of the elf. Noblewomen sometimes did such things. His own mother had filled her apartments at the city estate with her pets: lapdogs, cats, rugs from Orzammar – and elves, too. Vaughan had learned early not to risk Mamma's wrath by harming one of them. Ladies were fond of small, pretty creatures, and liked to have them about. If one of Mamma's pets displeased her, she always saw to the punishments – or disposal – herself.

Father thought highly of Bronwyn, and was disappointed that she had been removed from the marriage market by her conscription into the Grey Wardens. Vaughan agreed that it was an outrageous abuse of the Right of Conscription. Bronwyn was making the best of it, being dutiful like all the Couslands, and she was quite charming and of unimpeachable lineage. Before the darkspawn had ruined her

face, she had been quite beautiful, as well. He had not seen her in years, but she had been exceptionally appealing even as a very young girl. A shame, what had happened. Ladies should not be put in a position in which they were forced to take up arms. It was... unfeminine.

Still, she was a willful creature, and would have been a handful as a wife. His intended, Habren Bryland, was much more to his taste: delicate, refined, ladylike, soft-handed, fond of pretty things, and with a keen fashion sense. When Father had written of the arrangement between him and Arl Leonas, Vaughan had dutifully made his courtesies to the young lady. To his surprise and pleasure, he found that they had much in common. He was quite looking forward to their wedding...

But he had unfinished business with that elf whore. Just because the bitch had ingratiated herself with Bronwyn, the little tart imagined herself beyond justice. Bronwyn, however, had serious business to attend to, and would be gone in a day or so. It was doubtful that she would burden herself with a useless pet. When she was gone, it should not be hard to lure the elf beyond the camp, and then let the darkspawn take the blame when her body was found...

The Wardens and their friends gathered just before they turned in for the night. Bronwyn told them their mission for the following day: to hunt down and slay The Witch of the Wilds, who when roused to fury took the form of a High

Dragon. It was daunting, to say the least, but they would have support, in the form of ballistae with poisoned and explosive bolts, a company of archers, and a dozen more mages.

Zevran grinned at Carver Hawke. "You will find, my young friend, that we lead lives of high adventure! A dragon! Now that is something that even I have never fought."

Sten frowned. "We are undertaking this as a training mission? That is a valid use of time and resources. I have never faced a dragon either. It will be interesting to see which tactics prove effective."

Cullen was suspicious of Morrigan's grimoire, but very eager for the adventure: possibly the most eager of all the Wardens. Simply the fact that she was an apostate mage made her a suitable target. That she had no doubt killed dozens – possibly hundreds – of Templars, confirmed that it was their duty. When he heard the secret of her long life, he was implacable.

"She's been murdering innocent young girls for hundreds of years!" he burst out passionately, ignoring the fact that under ordinary circumstances he would never have described Morrigan as an "innocent young girl." He stalked back and forth, full of tall indignation. "Kidnapping little children! Possessing them like a demon – driving their souls from their bodies. That *is* murder! To think that she's been doing this for ages. I thought that the Hero Cormac killed her!"

"'Tis a myth," Morrigan said with a shrug. "Flemeth told me that she never had dealings with Cormac at all."

Danith's curiosity was aroused. "This Flemeth... she is the same one we know as 'Asha'bellanar'?"

Morrigan bowed her head in assent. "The Woman of Many Years. You are indeed correct."

"I don't know the story at all," Brosca interrupted. "Tell us about it!"

Smirking, Morrigan gestured at Leliana. "Surely our bard has heard something of Flemeth, The Witch of the Wilds?"

Leliana said, "The story of Flemeth is very famous. This is what I was taught:"

LELIANA'S STORY OF THE LEGEND OF FLEMETH:

Ages ago, legend says Bann Conobar took to wife a beautiful young woman who harbored a secret talent for magic: Flemeth of Highever. And for a time they lived happily, until the arrival of a young poet, Osen, who captured the lady's heart with his verse.

They turned to the Chasind tribes for help and hid from Conobar's wrath in the Wilds, until word came to them that Conobar lay dying: His last wish was to see Flemeth's face one final time.

The lovers returned, but it was a trap. Conobar killed Osen, and imprisoned Flemeth in the highest tower of the castle. In grief and rage, Flemeth worked a spell to summon a spirit into this world to wreak vengeance upon her husband. Vengeance, she received, but not as she planned. The spirit took possession of her, turning Flemeth into an abomination. A twisted, maddened creature, she

slaughtered Conobar and all his men, and fled back into the Wilds.

For a hundred years, Flemeth plotted, stealing men from the Chasind to sire monstrous daughters: horrific things that could kill a man with fear. These Korcari witches led an army of Chasind from the Wilds to strike at the Alamarri tribes. They were defeated by the hero Cormac, and all the witches burned, so they say, but even now the Wilders whisper that Flemeth lives on in the marsh, and she and her daughters steal those men who come too near.

Adaia listened with wide eyes, for this was a story she had never heard. The mages listened more critically, looking for the facts amid the fancy. Carver Hawke was impressed that they would be going up against such a creature. He was a bit impressed with himself for being in such dauntless company.

Morrigan listened with increasing impatience. "Yes, yes, yes. 'Tis all very well, and that is the story, but Flemeth tells a different tale!"

MORRIGAN'S VERSION OF THE LEGEND OF FLEMETH.

As the tale is sung by the bards, there was a time when Flemeth was young and beautiful. A fair lass in a land of barbarian men, the desire of any who saw her. And that much, Flemeth says, is true. She was indeed beautiful and desirable, and many men wished her favor.

However, Flemeth told me that it was the bard Osen who was her husband, and Lord Conobar the one who admired from afar. At length, he offered Osen a rich reward, if he would relinquish Flemeth to him. I see that you are shocked at the idea, but the life of a bard — most especially the life of a bard in those savage days — was poor and hard. Osen and Flemeth agreed to Conobar's offer.

But Conobar bargained with coin he did not possess. Instead, he ordered his men to slay Osen and take Flemeth to his castle. He showed himself to be a man without honor, and Flemeth despised him in her heart. Spirits gathered about her, sensing her hidden power, and spoke to her, and gave her the means to revenge herself upon Conobar.

So she slew him and escaped, fleeing south into the Wilds, where she has lived to this day. She denies that she and her 'daughters' ever rallied an 'army' to attack the Alamarri tribes. There was such an incursion, but she says she played no part in it. As to the 'Hero' Cormac, Flemeth says that he instigated a bloody civil war amongst the chiefs of the land, claiming to be ridding it of evil. She was attached to his story much later. As I said, Flemeth herself insists that she never fought any warrior named Cormac at all.

But none can deny her power. Some call her the Witch of the Wilds. The Chasind know her as The Woman of Many Years. So too, as we have heard, is she known to the Dalish. Yes, Asha'bellanar is the name.

I, too, have heard the tale of Flemeth's 'daughters,' and the Chasind tell of how she waged war against them, slew them, and

ate their hearts. There is a grain of truth in all old stories, and now I know that there is truth in that one. No doubt Flemeth wishes to 'eat my heart' as she has all the rest of her daughters through the ages. I do not intend to permit it.

"Of course," Astrid said afterwards, "there's no particular reason to think Flemeth's version is more accurate than the other."

Morrigan said coolly, "I know of no reason for her to lie."

"That's just it," Astrid pressed on. "You *wouldn't*. On the other hand, what reason has she to tell the truth? We already know she never hesitated to keep the truth from you. I think we should be very careful about anything this being says. You say she looks human. Is she? I hadn't heard that humans live for hundreds of years."

"She is a very powerful mage —"

"She must be a maleficar!" Cullen declared. Jowan slunk back into a corner.

"No!" Morrigan denied it, but seemed a little shaken. "She despises Blood Magic. She considers it the resort of weak mages. She forbade me ever to attempt it."

Anders thought about it, "But if she were, and she wanted to keep you under her domination, that is *exactly* what she would say..."

This seemed to disturb Morrigan even more. "I do not think she is. I have never her seen her use blood to power even the greatest of her spells. What you say —" she nodded

to Astrid" — may be truer than you know. It is possible that she is no longer human. Her story tells of a demon within her, but she has never taken the form of an abomination."

Cullen was fascinated, despite himself. "And abominations cannot be hidden," he said. "They have a very distinctive appearance. And for both her soul and a demon to jump from body to body sounds very... unusual, to say the least. We must be vigilant that she does not attempt to possess one of our mages!"

Bronwyn nodded slowly. "They will be warned to be on their guard. Loghain is letting us bring several of the Circle mages along. Any recommendations?"

A list was put together, and Bronwyn detailed Anders to talk to Uldred and Torrin as soon as their own council ended.

"Bronwyn..." Tara asked hesitantly. "In the story, Flemeth is from Highever. You're from there. Is she just in a story, or is she in real history?"

Bronwyn had been thinking that over as well. The story had implications that made her a little uncomfortable. Highever Castle was very old: one of the oldest in Ferelden. Flemeth had been the chatelaine — however unwillingly — of the very castle that had been Bronwyn's home from the day of her birth. It was disturbing to imagine Flemeth presiding in the same hall where Bronwyn's father and mother had held sway.

Nonetheless, she saw no reason not to share with them what her tutor had taught her.

With a self-conscious laugh, she said, "You might say that the Cousland family owes its rise to Flemeth. Back in the Towers Age, before there was a Ferelden, Highever was ruled by the Elstan family. They were cousins of the Howes. In our chronicles, it is indeed written that the last of the Elstans, Bann Conobar, was murdered by his wife Flemeth. That would have happened just after the end of the Third Blight, around Towers 3:30. After his death, a cousin, Sarim Cousland, claimed Highever, and the Couslands have ruled there ever since. In the Black Age, Haelia Cousland rallied the North against the Lycanthrope Plague, and she was acclaimed as Teyrna. That was a hundred years before the crowing of King Calenhad and the unification of Ferelden in Exalted 5:42. Thus, if this Flemeth is the same Flemeth in our chronicles, she has to be at least six hundred years old. I would say that even if she began life as a human, she can't be considered human anymore."

Oghren began to chuckle. "Human or not, you're still related to her. I guess it's sod-all true that you can't pick your relatives!"

Morrigan snickered, glad to see someone else the center of such unwelcome attention.

Bronwyn said, a bit hotly, "If we are related at all, it is only by marriage. Six hundred years ago."

"Can't pick your in-laws either," Oghren agreed genially. "Stone knows that's true!"

Anders turned to Morrigan. "That's nice. No, it's really nice.

You and Bronwyn are some sort of foster-cousins-by-marriage. It's a small world, after all." Morrigan scowled at him, not at the idea of being related to Bronwyn, but at his tone.

"There is one other thing," Bronwyn announced. "Teyrn Loghain wants a Warden in his party to keep watch for darkspawn. Jowan, that's you."

"Me?" Jowan asked, his voice rising to a squeak. "With Teyrn Loghain?"

Light laughter. Bronwyn smiled patiently. "Yes, you. It's a very reasonable request. When we separate, you will stick close to him, and let him know if you sense darkspawn. Once we are engaged, you can still use long distance spells on Flemeth."

"I wouldn't mind sticking close to Teyrn Loghain," Tara said teasingly. "He's so very imposing. I suppose he doesn't like elves."

Leliana sighed, "I suppose he would not like my accent, either. He is indeed a very impressive man. In his silverite armor, he looks like the noblest of chevaliers, but probably he would not like to hear that."

Bronwyn struggled in vain against a grin. "I am quite sure he would not. He asked specifically for a mage, and you must not feel snubbed, Tara. I think he wanted to avoid appearing in the least like Bann Vaughan, with his horrible behavior toward elf women. Besides, Jowan is most junior, and is thus the proper candidate. Don't look like that, Jowan, and don't quail before him. He hates that sort of thing!"

Adaia whispered to Danith. The Dalish elf frowned, and

then after more prodding, reluctantly spoke. "Would this dragon be vulnerable to bombs and poisons?"

Bronwyn considered this, and when she turned to reply, she saw a beaming Adaia, practically jumping up and down beside the impassive Danith.

"I should think," Bronwyn said slowly, 'that such things might be very useful indeed.'

The following morning, they moved out at first light, barely taking the time for a hasty breakfast. Along with the Wardens' party, a band of Circle mages, and a company of skilled archers, Loghain brought Cauthrien and some two dozen picked men from Maric's Shield. Trundling with surprising ease over the marshy terrain were a pair of light two-wheeled carts that could be handled one man – or dwarf each. These were laden with an assortment of supplies and a cylinder filled with ballista bolts.

Morrigan remained at their quarters in the Tower of Ishal, sitting with queenly dignity by the window. When the party marched out, she made herself join the excited Adaia in waving at their companions. They were acting to a certain extent to protect her, and she owed them that much courtesy. Anders glanced up, looking for her. She did not find it hard to grant him a smile.

She had agreed to escort Adaia to and from her work at the bomb workshop, and knew to keep a sharp lookout for Bann Vaughan and his lackeys. She pretended to be indif-

ferent to whatever story the elf-girl had told Bronwyn, but she had heard the shreds of gossip and was unsurprised. That creature, Bann Vaughan, had leered at her as well. Leered with more restraint than he used with the elves, but it was still offensive. *He was offensive.*

What should she do with herself today? Without Bronwyn's presence... without Anders' near her, or the support of the rest of the company... Morrigan confessed to herself that she felt rather at loose ends. Teyrn Loghain had gone with the expedition, too, and he at least could exert some control over the mob of stupid, brutal men. There were a half-dozen Templars in the camp, which was never a good thing. Luckily with the large number of mages present, it was unlikely that she would attract their attention. She would take Adaia to her workshop, return swiftly to the Wardens' quarters, and spend the day in pleasant privacy: washing her hair, reading, brushing her gown, mending a tiny tear in one of her stockings.

Arl Bryland was in charge of the camp, and Morrigan had been introduced to him, along with the rest of Bronwyn's companions. He had been quite polite and friendly, but he was clearly only interested in Bronwyn, who was his near relation. Probably in an emergency it might be possible to appeal to him, but Morrigan would prefer than there was no such emergency.

It was tempting, so terribly tempting to shift into a hawk and follow the Wardens back to Mother's – no, to

Flemeth's hut. She would like to see them deal with her with her own eyes. She was concerned, too, lest Flemeth do damage to those who had befriended her. Morrigan had given Anders strict instructions to remain in the back of the party, providing support as a healer. Let the others risk their foolish necks battling Flemeth. Nothing must happen to Anders. There was nothing she could do to protect Brownyn and Tara, however, and she would not insult them with vain pleas to let others face the danger.

Bronwyn had little need of the map she and Morrigan had devised together. She had been this way twice, and even with the change of season it seemed perfectly familiar. No doubt Teyrn Loghain felt more secure with his copy, so it was hardly a wasted effort. It was a relief that Loghain had fallen in with her own plans so readily. She faced today's adventure with some anxiety, despite her pretence of cheerful calm. The additional equipment she carried only reassured her a little.

A gloomy day it was: the sun shown red briefly at daybreak below an increasing cover of dark grey cloud. The wind had stilled, after a stiff breeze earlier. Now it was ominously silent. Bronwyn concentrated and found only the faintest hint of darkspawn: probably a mere remnant of some prior incursion. They marched on, making as little noise as possible. Everyone had been ordered to avoid any but the most necessary speech.

Just before the last low ridge that led to Flemeth's lair, the party divided. Three of the mages would join the Wardens: Niall, Ilon, and Gwyneth. They were nervous, but pleased to be chosen. The rest of the Circle Mages would stay with Loghain. Jowan fidgeted before Wynne's angry glare. Uldred smirked at him, and Torrin and most of the rest simply look disapproving. Gwyneth, at least, gave him a smile. He managed a small smile in return.

Loghain laid a hand on Bronwyn's forearm, and murmured, "Luck in battle."

She smiled radiantly, cheered by the words. "You too, my lord."

Wardens, soldiers, mages, and archers all smirked and nodded to each other. Bronwyn caught the glance Zevran shared with Tara, and narrowed her eyes. Their expressions instantly changed to masks of perfect innocence. Jowan threw her a last look of appeal, and she mouthed, "Good luck!" at him, in what she hoped was her most encouraging way. He did not seem comforted, and slunk after Loghain and Cauthrien as if going to his execution.

The Wardens moved on directly, no longer attempting to be silent. Loghain took his party along the back of the ridge, using the tree cover, ordering some of the men to carry the carts over the awkward terrain. They curved stealthily around the high ground, avoiding the treacherous marshes, moving to the west of the abandoned tower shown on the map. At one point, Loghain motioned his party to stop, and clambered cautiously up the ridge, lying

flat to get a look at the killing ground.

When he had been here, more than half a lifetime ago, he and Maric had been cold and starving: too disoriented to take proper note of their surroundings. However, he did recall the witch's hut vaguely, and remembered now that stone wall to one side. That was the ruined tower. Flemeth's dwelling was of wood, and leaned crazily against the stone. There was no one in sight. He hoped that at this early hour the witch was inside and not roaming about in animal form, discovering their plans. He slipped back down the ridge, stooping, and led his people on.

His eyes met Jowan's briefly. The mage flinched and looked away. They would have to have a talk. It seemed unlikely that Jowan had told Bronwyn of his prior dealings with Loghain. She simply was not that good at concealing her feelings. She would no doubt disapprove, if she knew that he had sent Jowan as his agent to Redcliffe. Word had reached him that young Connor was a mage, and that the Arlessa was looking for an apostate mage to teach the boy how to conceal his magic. His most trusted men had been on the lookout for an apostate who could be of use to Loghain. They had rescued Jowan from the hands of the Templars who had captured him after his escape from the Tower.

The mage had been terrified of him, but grateful — even eager — for the opportunity to serve his country. The poison he had given Jowan was not supposed to kill Eamon, but

to keep him quiet and out of the political arena. However, such things happened. Either Jowan had given him too strong a dose, or the poison was more powerful than its reputation. Or Eamon was weaker than Loghain had judged him. All of these things were possible. However, after learning of Eamon's participation in Cailan's plot against Anora, Loghain felt no regret at all at his part in the man's death, other than the harm the debacle had caused the innocent people of the castle and the village.

Others, of course, might feel very differently. He considered the need for Jowan to have a fatal accident during the current expedition. Too risky, unless a very good opportunity came his way. Bronwyn would be incensed if he attacked any of her Wardens, just as he would be at an attack against his own men. Perfectly natural.

Jowan walked a little faster, and muttered, just loud enough for Loghain to hear, "Please, my lord. Don't ever tell her."

Loghain glared at the mage, but that was a mere cover for his thoughts. So the mage had no more desire for Bronwyn to know of the poisoning than Loghain did. Very convenient.

He muttered back, "You were supposed to seek me out for your reward."

"I don't need a reward, my lord. I'm a Grey Warden now. Bronwyn has given me a second chance. I don't want her to regret it."

"Very well," Loghain shrugged, secretly very pleased. "Suit

yourself. I shall keep your secret as long as you keep mine."

"Thank you, my lord," Jowan whispered. "Thank you!" Loghain waved at him impatiently, frowning him into silence.

They were nearly in position now, and there was no more time or opportunity to talk. Loghain could hear Bronwyn's clear voice, pitched to carry in the open air, and a lower, harsher female voice answering her. Flemeth. Cauthrien's eyes were on him, eager for his orders. He raised his hand, gesturing to the dwarves. It was time.

"So lovely Morrigan has found someone to dance to her tune," Flemeth drawled. The contemptuous amusement in her voice irritated Bronwyn, and she was not alone. Around her, her companions tensed. She could feel the hostility radiating from Anders, behind her, glaring at the old woman.

"We did not come here to talk, Flemeth," Bronwyn said clearly, hoping that Loghain could hear her. Beside her, Scout growled, teeth bared.

"Really?" The Witch of the Wilds cocked her head, studying her. "And what are you here for? A book, perhaps?"

Anders narrowed his eyes. Of course Flemeth would know about that. Morrigan had told him that if he took nothing else, he must find and bring Flemeth's true grimoire back with him. Tara and Jowan had been informed as well. What they wanted to avoid, aside from being killed by this powerful mage, was for the book to fall into the Circle's Hands.

"We are here to stop you, creature!" Cullen shouted.

"A Templar!" Flemeth was even more amused. "I have known so many of your kind, over the years. Not for long, granted, but they were invariably too weak to survive..." Her eyes, dancing with mock reproach, turned once more to Bronwyn, "I did not think you the sort to turn on one who had once served you well."

"Well, it seems that great age has not made you wise," Bronwyn said. It sounded deplorably pert, even to her own ears, but she wanted to get this over with.

Flemeth shrugged. "Very well. If nothing else will satisfy you..." She turned her back to them and began walking away, up to the high ground near her hut, as if they were of no further interest to her. Some of the Circle Mages murmured, confused. Bronwyn had a moment of sickening doubt, wondering if Morrigan was wrong; if she had brought Loghain and all his men here, simply to watch her cut down a defenseless old woman.

"Well," Brosca demanded eagerly, "is she going to do that thing she does, or... *Stone save us!*"

The air exploded outward, like a body blow. Some of the smaller party members, like Tara and Danith, were knocked back a few steps. The sudden vast bulk before them was startling, huge, unthinkable. Bronwyn caught her breath in a quick gasp, and shouted, "*Bombs!*"

The High Dragon screamed defiance with a bellow that shook the earth. To the rear of the hut, Loghain's voice was heard, raised in command, and then was a sudden hard

slam, and then another, as two ballistae sent explosive bolts at the dragon on the hill. One soared over the dragon's haunch and drove into the marsh beyond with a crackle and a hiss. The other connected, and chunk of armored scale was blown from the creature's vast back. It threw its head back and shrieked. Uldred's ice spell connected briefly, freezing its hindquarters. A volley of poisoned arrows cast a dim shadow. Some struck and bounced off the creature's armor, some lodged harmlessly in cracks between the scales. Some struck the wings, and were deflected by the leathery skin. One struck the dragon near the eye, and it flinched, shaking its horned head back and forth. A huge foreclaw rose up and batted at, finally pulling it loose.

Sten had a mighty throwing arm. He lobbed a shock bomb at the Dragon's feet, casting blue-white sparks in a fearsome crackle. Bronwyn cast another, which fell a little short. Still, sparks flew up and struck the Dragon's nose, startling it backwards. Five more bombs followed. Carver Hawke's bomb struck the Dragon at the top of her head, spilling acid into her left eye. Flemeth shrieked again, and with a tremendous downstroke, attempted to take to the air.

Cauthrien shouted, "Loose!"

Another volley was launched. Loghain had briefed the archers to aim high. Under no circumstances were they to risk hitting one of the ground troops.

Dworkin cackled, and fired his ballista a few seconds ahead of Voldrik. The first bolt struck the flesh of the belly,

blowing a bloody hole in it the size of a shield. Voldrik's bolt would have missed entirely, had not Flemeth flapped her right wing in an attempt to gain her balance. A flash and a bang, and the wing joint shattered. The Dragon ceased to be a flying creature in that moment.

Another soul-wrenching shriek. Another half-dozen bombs struck on or near the Dragon. It shook off the trickles of ice and acid, and faced its attackers, opening huge jaws. It breathed in, sucking the air from the lungs of everyone facing it, and then —

"Move!" Bronwyn screamed. "Get out of the way!"

A firestorm erupted from the dragon. Searing yellow flames licked and pummeled them, Fire so hot that for the first second it was painless. Alistair and Astrid threw themselves behind their shields, letting the Dragon spend her wrath on them.

Bronwyn lay gasping, face-down on the marshy ground, grateful beyond words for her dragonbone armor. Scout huddled by her, whining from the pain of a scorched ear. Bronwyn pushed herself up on her elbows, and looked around. Others had not fared so well. Leliana was keening with pain, her voice wild and unbeautiful. Tara had fallen, and rolled down the hill, without a sound. The young Hawke boy was not moving either. Zevran's wide, wide eyes were surrounded by soot, as he scrambled on hands and knees.

Brosca's face was red with a glancing burn. She stood up and said something that Bronwyn did not quite under-

stand, other than it must be extremely filthy, for Oghren burst out with a laugh that resembled a groan.

There was a deep, deep growl, and Bronwyn instantly focused on the Dragon before her. It had lowered its head, and was readying itself for another blast.

"Now!" Bronwyn screamed. "Follow me!"

Alistair understood her. She ran to one side, and he to the other, their teams behind them, while Sten taunted the beast in the center, distracting it from the puny figures charging it.

Lying on her belly on the ground. Tara raised her staff, briefly stunning the Dragon. It coughed, choking on its own fiery breath. More spells followed: paralysis spells, weakening hexes, Torrín's very powerful imprisonment spell, more ice spells. Anders could only give a glance to the battle raging on the hillside, as he healed Leliana's arm and Danith's broken leg. Niall moved forward in his stead, casting and casting as the warriors before him faced death.

Jowan was ashamed to be relieved that he was so far from the fight. The best spell he could cast at this distance drained life from the Dragon. It was not much, but he could target it precisely enough not to endanger his friends. It would suck that much of the creature's life force every time he cast it. And it felt... wonderful. Some of the other mages saw what he was doing, and tried it as well.

The Dragon managed another blast of flame, but the attackers had moved to the sides and Sten rolled out of the way... mostly. Niall cast another healing spell.

The archers and ballistae could do no more without hitting allies. Loghain roared, "Charge!" and Maric's Shield burst into a run behind him. The Dragon screamed in surprise and alarm.

Bronwyn was aware of almost none of this. A sword and a dagger, she found, were almost laughable weapons against a High Dragon. It was so hard to stay clear of claws and the lashing tail that she could hardly get in a stab. Hacking at the scales was all but useless. What would work? The mages were helping a great deal, slowing it down, not giving it time or peace to take a deep, lethal breath.

"Cullen!" she shouted. "Give me a boost!"

The dear fellow understood her immediately. He dropped Yusaris to the ground, and cupped his hands for her boot. A mad scramble and a jolt, and Bronwyn was on Flemeth's back, trying to dig in with her dagger to a crack in the scales. The creature lurched, and Bronwyn's chin hit the rugged back. Teeth met on the inside of her cheek and she tasted blood. Behind her, Brosca was yelling, "Me! Me! Do me, too!" A few seconds later, a rattling thud announced her arrival.

Ice formed, cold and slippery, under Bronwyn's gauntlets. The dragon was trying to draw a deep breath again. Bronwyn got her feet under her and stabbed down hard where the scales curved at the base of the long neck. Trying to fight two-handed was insane. She frantically sheathed her dagger, and gripped her longsword's hilt with both

hands, using all her weight to force her blade into the creature's spine. How much armor protected it?

She looked up, and found herself face to face with the Dragon. Its head was snaked back on the long, long neck, glaring at her with hatred and malice. The dripping jaws opened...

An acid bomb exploded in them, and Brosca shrieked. "Got you, bitch!"

The dragon bellowed its anguish to the skies. Bronwyn tugged her useless longword out of the creature's back, and clambered forward, clinging to the spikes that sprouted from the neck. Luckily, they were not dangerously sharp, and she began inching her way to the creature's head. She was good at climbing, and this was like climbing... a little. Like climbing a wall that *moved*. The Dragon thrashed and twisted, trying to shake her off. Behind her Brosca laughed and whooped, crawling up behind her. Flemeth's head ducked down, biting at the warriors on the ground.

It was madness: it was chaos. The Dragon's tail knocked warriors aside like toys. Brief goutts of flame blossomed from the gigantic jaws. One of his men screamed as he was stepped on. A few other dragged him aside. Foot-long fangs snapped where Cauthrien had been only a moment before. Loghain bashed at the massive head with his shield. Nothing else seemed to make any impression on it. Bronwyn's hound had found him and was baying at the Dragon. taunting it. Loghain was pleased to have the

dog by his side, and hoped nothing would happen to the animal that Bronwyn would never, ever forgive. Where was she, anyway?

Flemeth was hurt and weakened, but still very, very dangerous. Loghain had no idea how the Nevarrans had done this for a living. *They must have been absolutely desperate. All things considered, I'd really, really rather be a farmer than a dragon-hunter.*

The head slammed down again in a frenzy, like a horse trying to shake a burr from under a saddle. Loghain caught an outline of something that ought not to be on the dragon's neck and nearly froze in his tracks. Bronwyn!

Was the girl completely insane?

He flinched aside from a strange stink. Alistair was there, pouring something vile from a flask over his blade. Seeing Loghain looking, the boy yelled, "You want some? It's great!"

It couldn't hurt. Quickly he offered the flat of his blade and the boy splashed out the rest of it, and hurled the empty flask far out into the marsh. The head was low enough again for his blade. Loghain jabbed up and caught it under the jaw. The sword briefly caught against the bone, and for a harrowing moment, Loghain was lifted off his feet.

He fell to earth with a crash of silverite, and rolled out of the way of the pressing mill of angry, almost ineffectual warriors.


No, not entirely ineffectual. The Dragon was distracted by them. The bearded dwarf was hewing at a massive

foreleg with his axe. He was doing damage. An axe was certainly a better weapon against a dragon than a sword.

Others had seen what the girl was doing and had followed her lead. That blond elf was on the dragon's back, digging his blade into the hide just under the hip, where it was thinner. It seemed to slow the Dragon. Another little figure was weighing down the dragon's neck, stabbing at it again and again. Loghain could not tell whether it was a dwarf or an elf.

He felt a sudden rush of renewed strength and well-being. It was that mage of his, no doubt. He hoped she was doing likewise for everyone else.

Flemeth howled and lurched again. Above him, Bronwyn was clinging to one of the massive horns.



She was almost there. She was so very close. The Dragon shook her head from side to side. Bronwyn's belly roiled with nausea. She swallowed hard against the bile rising in her throat. The horn was almost as long as she was tall. She lodged herself between it and the massive head, and crawled closer. The head dipped down. At the sudden jolt, Bronwyn felt like she had left her stomach behind. Frantic as the beast was, she could feel that it was weaker now. Below her in the melee, she saw people she knew. Loghain, utterly fearless, and Ser Cauthrien, swinging her immense sword. Scout was there: alive and barking. Young Carver was on his feet again. Bronwyn felt a fleeting relief that she had not killed him with this first mission.

The space between the scales was wider over the back of the head. The creature relied on the huge horns to protect it there. Bronwyn slid forward, groping for the joint. She put the tip of her sword against it, braced her legs, and pushed. And *pushed*...

A high-pitched shriek, surpassing anything that gone before, rose up. Warriors clutched at their ears in agony. The mages shuddered back, fumbling at silencing spells. It lasted, it seemed, forever, and then was cut off abruptly. The dragon's head fell like stone, slamming hard into the earth. The body tottered and collapsed to the side, as everyone screamed and pushed and rolled and thrashed to get out of its way.

Bronwyn fell with it, half-stunned by the concussion, clutching at her sword in a death grip. People were yelling and cheering, laughing and hugging. She decided she should get up from the dragon's head and say a few words of thanks.

She rose slowly... and then vomited a little on Flemeth's head. Everyone was still cheering. Even dignified sorts like Astrid and Cauthrien were cheering. Alistair and Cullen were slapping each other on the back. Loghain was not cheering, but he was smiling at her. Not smiling, exactly... more like *grinning*. She must be dizzy from the shock. She wiped her mouth and gave a little wave, smiling weakly. Maybe no one would notice the vomit.

"Boss!" Brosca slid off the dragon's shoulder and ran to her. "Boss! You are the biggest, baddest badass of all time!"

CHAPTER 10



COME HOME WITH ME TONIGHT

T WAS DIFFICULT NOT TO GLOAT OVER THE THINGS HER... FRIENDS... BROUGHT TO HER FROM FLEMETH'S HUT. Morrigan knelt

by the big chest, smiling at the contents within.

Yes, they were her friends. Some of them, anyway. Bronwyn and Tara, certainly. Jowan was not so bad. Anders behaved as if he *loved* her, though of course that was nonsense. What mattered was that they had stood by her and protected her.

All Flemeth's rare and precious books were now hers, including Flemeth's true Grimoire, possibly the most extraordinary book of magic in all Thedas.

There were various trinkets, magical and non-magical. There was a curious amulet that seemed to be more decorative than useful. There was a set of fresh robes, obviously made for her by Flemeth. Her friends were looking them over, for Jowan sensed some subtle enchantments that might be harmful. She was thinking about finding something else to wear anyway, as she was tired of all the gaping and gawking and goggling. She had taken to

wearing her fine green gown here in Ostagar. It caused the underlings to treat her with more respect. Bronwyn thought she should wear light armor, but Bronwyn thought *everyone* should wear armor...

There had even been a bit of coin. Bronwyn and Anders had made certain that that was Morrigan's, too. Coin was a very pleasant thing to have.

Bronwyn seemed to think that Morrigan should thank everyone for their assistance, and she would do so before they all went to dinner tonight. She would show Anders more material gratitude afterward...

While they were gone to their Flemeth-slaying, she had performed her own assigned duties most diligently, shepherding that little elf. Yes, some men had followed them, pretending to be about their own business. Morrigan was not deceived for an instant. Her pride would not permit the louts to have their way in harming the girl, not when Morrigan herself had said they would not. She lurked nearby in bird form for much of the day, keeping an eye on the workshop; and then had walked back to their quarters with the girl. She had considered a visit to the quartermasters, but it was the sort of place where the wrong sort could make difficulties. Morrigan did not fear them, but she did not want to have kill some fools and then be ejected from the camp by Teyrn Loghain. That would be embarrassing, and would not suit her purposes at all. Her quarters were very comfortable, and she pre-

ferred that her food be prepared by servitors. Better to avoid a confrontation...

And then the expedition had returned, victorious but battered. Bronwyn had slain Flemeth herself, which was most gallant and heroic. She was in a thoughtful mood, remarking that they had learned a great deal – mainly about the impotence of blades against dragonhide. The ballistae that Teyrn Loghain was so exercised about had proved of some use, though more work was needed. Everything was going as well as could be, all things considered. Morrigan felt as if a huge burden had been lifted from her. Flemeth had raised her, acted as a parent to her, taught her. Was Morrigan a monster to feel not the least regret at her passing?

"If I am, then so be it," she whispered to herself. "For I regret it not at all."

Rumor had it that the Girl Warden had slain the Archdemon. Even some of the soldiers who had accompanied the mission wanted to believe it: even those who had witnessed the transformation from woman to dragon. How could the Archdemon be worse than that mountain of flame and violence?

Loghain heard the rumor early on, since his officers were trained to give him important news whether it was what he wanted to hear or not. He called the nobles and senior officers into a briefing, and informed them – force-

fully – that the creature they had killed in the Wilds was not the Archdemon, but a High Dragon that was a manifestation of the creature known as Flemeth, the Witch of the Wilds. Flemeth would have been very dangerous to them, in time, but she was not, alas, the Archdemon. They had kept the mission quiet so as not to alert Flemeth to their intentions. However, they had successfully destroyed her threat, and learned a great deal about dragon-slaying tactics that would no doubt prove useful when the Archdemon eventually made its appearance.

Bronwyn attended the briefing, of course, along with Alistair, as her Second. Her testimony supported Loghain's, as she fielded anxious questions and starstruck awe.

"Yes, I am sure it was not the Archdemon. This dragon was not Tainted. I saw the Archdemon, albeit at a distance, when I was in the Deep Roads. Although a deep chasm separated us, that creature was larger, and disfigured by the darkspawn Taint. Furthermore, I spoke to Flemeth before she transformed. She was not the Old God Urthemiel, but unquestionably Flemeth, whom I had met twice before. We learned that she was planning an attack of her own. She was a powerful mage who had lived for centuries and had the power to transform into a High Dragon. She did so, and as a High Dragon she perished."

A red-haired officer called out, "Word is that you slew the creature yourself, Warden!"

Loghain smiled slightly, and nodded at the gathering. "I

can confirm it. It was Warden-Commander Bronwyn who drove her sword into the creature's brain."

These were not foolish young warriors, but a hum of admiration arose from those assembled, nonetheless.

Bronwyn declined to take all the credit. "While I struck the killing blow, I would not have got near the creature without the efforts of every man and woman who took part in the expedition. Warriors, mages, archers – our estimable dwarven engineers – everyone played a part in this victory."

Arl Wulffe growled, "Not *everyone* jumped on a dragon's back, my girl!"

The hum grew louder, more excited. Bronwyn put up a hand. "If the ballistae hadn't rendered the creature flightless, jumping on its back would have been a remarkably foolish thing to do!"

Loghain snorted, nearly laughing. He had thought it a mad thing to do, anyway. It was a relief that the girl had a modicum of sense.

Arl Bryland thought Loghain was too reserved in giving Bronwyn credit. The man was always taciturn, but this was an extraordinary deed.

"Your modesty does you credit, cousin, but the truth is the truth. Let all present hear me! I name this woman Dragonslayer, and I offer my esteem and honor to her."

"Hear, hear!" agreed Bann Vaughan loudly. Arl Wulffe grunted approval.

The hard-bitten officers cheered. The nobles cheered,

too – even those who did not care much for the Couslands – even those who thought Bryland was using his kinship to the Girl Warden for his own advantage. Killing a dragon was something to cheer about, no matter who did it. And it was, of course, an excellent reason to party hard.

"I want to tell my story before Bronwyn leaves tomorrow," Adaia told Tara. She had thought about it, and it was something she could do. The more she thought about it, the more important she felt it was to communicate this story to people who did not understand her. She wanted important people to hear it. She wanted Bronwyn to hear it, and those Chantry types like Leliana and Cullen to hear it, too.

"Well," Tara said, finishing with her hair, "Go tell her. You should do it before we go down to dinner, because I suspect that dinner will evolve into a pretty wild party, and some of our friends might be sleeping elsewhere tonight."

"You tell her."

"Melian Tabris, you go right over there and do it yourself!" Tara commanded, pointing to Bronwyn, who was slipping on the cleaner of her two Warden tabards. Tara thought briefly that it was a shame that Bronwyn, who had been so generous to everyone else, had no gown to wear to this celebration.

"Don't call me that," Adaia sulked. "I don't want to be Melian anymore. All right... I'm going."

Bronwyn was chatting with Brosca as Adaia approached.

The cheerful dwarf girl nudged the Commander who looked up, smoothing her hair.

"Did you want something, Adaia?"

"Uhh... I was thinking I'd like to tell my story before you go away. I might forget it if I have to wait until you come back."

"Ooo! A story!" Brosca cheered. "Hey! Astrid! Oghren! Yeah, you, Oghren! Get your lazy backside over here. The kid wants to tell a story. Good idea, telling it before dinner," Brosca pointed out pragmatically. "Likely we'll all be drunk as King Valtor tonight!"

"People riding with me tomorrow had better be fit by daybreak," Bronwyn warned, only half-seriously. Her team seemed fairly levelheaded, and one of the mages could use a rejuvenation spell in case of emergency. All her people deserved a celebration.

"All right," she said to Adaia. "The cooks should not summon us so very soon. I wanted to call everyone together, anyway."

They gathered by the big fireplace, and found chairs or chests to sit on, or leaned against the wall, or perched on the sills. Brosca sat cross-legged on the floor. Scout sat beside her, about the same height. She scratched his doggy chin, and he let her. The small stone-smelling packmate was all right.

Bronwyn stood by the fire, and raised her hand for silence.

"Before dinner, there are some things that need to be said. First, I hope not to be gone long. My team and I will seek out Keeper Zathrian and his clan, find out where they stand on the treaty, and return as soon as possible.

It's hard to say how long that will take. While I am gone, Senior Warden Alistair is in charge, and he has my full confidence. Yes, you do, Alistair: don't make that face!"

Everyone laughed, even Alistair, who blushed. Adaia felt sorry for him, and thought about patting his hand, but then decided that would be too bold. Carver, sitting near Adaia, scowled. He was a bit jealous of Alistair. The Senior Warden was only a few years old than he was, and *he* had the full confidence of the Girl Warden, Lady Bronwyn Cousland. Alistair reminded him of his brother Adam, who Mother and Father treated as if he practically *perfect* in every way. Not that he could complain to Cullen about Alistair. They were best friends, after all. Carver wished *he* was going with Lady Bronwyn, so he could show her how much better he was than that blond ponce Alistair...

Bronwyn went on, "None of us knows when the Archdemon will rise. I don't sense anything imminent, and none of you have said anything to the contrary. If we can continue to contain the darkspawn threat here in the far south, then we are doing our jobs as Wardens. Everyone keep your ears open for rumors of darkspawn incursions elsewhere. We know there are other entrances to the Deep Roads. It's possible the Archdemon might send a sortie up through one of them. We can't watch them all."

She gestured at Morrigan. "Morrigan has something she wants to say to all of you."

The witch almost sighed loudly, and then realized that

might be construed as discourteous. Instead, she rose, arranging the skirt of her green gown, and stood before them to say what had to be said. Anders was beaming at her, so it would certainly be worth her while.

"I thank you all for your courage and skill at arms. Flemeth is no more. 'Tis good news to me, as I shall be safe hereafter from her scheming. It seems only reasonable for me to point out that you are now safe from her too, since her schemes were legion and would no doubt have affected you at some point. Nonetheless, I do thank you, most sincerely."

Mutters of "You're welcome," "No problem," sounded in reply. Oghren grunted, "You *should* thank me. My arse is still burning from where that stone-cursed thing breathed on me!"

Brosca gave him a shove. "Next time, don't try mooning a dragon!"

"Or anything, *ever*," Alistair muttered, grimacing.

Sten remarked, "It was an interesting battle. Much was learned. My people believe dragons to be extinct. That they are not is news that should be reported to the Arishok."

"There might not be any more dragons," Cullen pointed out. "That Flemeth creature was some sort of abomination. While she took the form of a dragon, she wasn't really a dragon. Maybe real dragons *are* extinct."

"After fighting her," Leliana shuddered, remembering her pain, "I certainly hope so."

Morrigan shook her head. "You do not understand the magic of shape-shifting. When Flemeth was transformed,

she *was* a real dragon. And the Archdemon certainly is one. The lore of the Tevinters states clearly that the Old Gods were dragons: intelligent, powerful dragons. We know that the Archdemon exists. Presumably at least two more of the Old Gods still sleep. Thus, there are certainly dragons."

"We need more of those ballistae," Astrid spoke up. "If the dragon's wing had not been damaged, it could have flamed us to cinders from the sky."

Bronwyn agreed. "More ballistae are under construction, with additional improvements. We also need to consider our own weapons. At the officers' briefing, Teyrn Loghain discussed needed upgrades to weaponry. My dragonbone dagger was far more effective against dragonhide than my silverite sword, until I found a particularly vulnerable spot."

"And some spots were more vulnerable than others!" Zevran said. "When I was being trained, we used outlines with the kill points marked. We should consider the nature of the dragon carefully, and learn its kill points, too."

"That is an excellent suggestion," Bronwyn said. "You're in charge of it, Zevran!" They all laughed. "Really, draw the outline, and everyone needs to think about what worked and what didn't. I expected the belly to be softer, but it wasn't. The joints, though, were weak spots. Anyplace where the scales did not overlap is a possibility. That was what I found at the back of its head, where the neck joined."

"I'll help him!" Carver volunteered. If he played his cards

right, he might find himself with a real dragonbone sword. Dear brother Adam had never even seen dragonbone.

While they were talking, Loghain and a few of his officers appeared at the door. Loghain paused, intending to ask Bronwyn to come down to dinner with him. She appeared to be having a meeting with her people, but she saw him and gave him a slight nod of acknowledgment. He motioned that she should go on, quietly enough that most of her people, watching her, did not notice him. She smiled, and changed the subject.

"Dinner will be announced soon, so enough of shop-talk! We have an entertainment. Another companion has a story for us! Adaia was good enough to have hers ready before some of us head north tomorrow. Please give her your full attention."

She took the big chair by the fire that Alistair had been holding empty for her, and then Adaia stepped forward, nervous but determined. Loghain was curious. He had heard something about the Wardens and their stories, and he moved into the room and took a seat by the door. One of his officers had pulled out a piece of parchment was was scribbling on it in pencil. It was Darnley, who was quite a good artist. Loghain supposed that the scene before him could be considered picturesque: the beautiful Girl Warden, lounging in a throne-like chair by the fire, a dog and a fierce little dwarf by her feet. Beside her, her loyal and handsome Second, a secret son of a king. On a low stool on

her other side was that Orlesian bard of hers, whispering to the pretty elf mage standing behind her. Dangerous and debonair, the Crow assassin kept watch. A tall and serious Templar leaned against the wall. An even taller and more serious Qunari glowered from the shadows in a corner. A pair of lovers, the man tall and blond, the woman dark and exquisite, looked into each other's eyes. On a nearby bench, a bearded dwarf quaffed a tankard of ale, while a handsome dwarf woman leaned forward, interested in the story. A tattooed Dalish elf, hair cropped close, crouched with casual alertness, oiling her bow. Their new young boy fidgeted near Bronwyn, eager for her notice. Farthest away, the maleficar Jowan sat, looking longingly at the rest, clearing wishing to be accepted as a friend and equal. Before them all, casting dancing shadows, stood the little city elf Adaia, long ears peeking through her shining hair.

"You may not like my story," she whispered.

"Didn't hear you!" Oghren rumbled. "Speak up!"

"Some of you may not like my story!" she nearly yelled. Turning red, she lowered her voice a little. "But this story is important to me. My friend Nola told it to me, and I think she made it up, like a lot of stories she told. Even you elves might not like it, or think it's a proper elven story, because it doesn't take place in a forest or an ancient palace. It's an Alienage story, so for me it's a story about home. I don't know if *I* like it either, but it's important to me, and it's important to me that I tell it to you."

ADAIA'S STORY OF THE HANDFUL OF RUSHLIGHTS

There was once a little girl who was wandering the streets of the Alienage one First Day Eve. It was nearly sunset, and it was so cold that the sewage in the gutters was frozen solid. Everyone who had a home to go to was eager to go there and stay there.

And it was First Day Eve after all. The rich people were roasting chickens with dried apples. Others were stewing pumpkin and salt pork. Even the poorest people would have hot bean soup with a bit of smoked mutton, and barley bread to dip in it. The good smells drifted the length and breadth of the Alienage, all the way to the gates on either side.

The girl lived with her aunt and her aunt's husband, because her father and mother were dead, and her old grandmother had died too. That was when things that were already bad got a lot worse for her.

She had been sent out into the street to sell rushlights, as she was every day. Shems can afford candles, but rushlights are popular in the Alienage. All you need is a penny's worth of rushes and some melted fat to dip them in, and they give a good steady light for a quarter of an hour. The girl's aunt made them now, but they were not as good as the ones her grandmother used to make.

That day, she had been told that she must sell enough rushlights to bring home ten coppers, but she had earned only seven. She was afraid of the beating her uncle would give her, so she found a corner when one house stuck out a little in front of another and

she crouched there, drawing her feet up under her.

Slowly, it grew dark. The street emptied, and the little girl was alone with her handful of rushlights.

Her curling hair was sprinkled with snowflakes, and the tips of her ears were numb. Her hands were red and blue with cold, because she had no gloves. Her grandmother had knit her some thick woolen mittens, but her aunt had taken those away and given them to her own child.

She thought about going to the hahren's house, because she knew he would give her something to eat; but he would take her home later, and her uncle would beat her where it didn't show. If she went to the orphanage, they would send her home without taking the trouble to feed her. She had tried that before.

Her hands were so stiff that she thought that one rushlight would do her good. She struck her flint against the wall, and lit a rushlight. How it blazed up! It burned with a bright clear flame when she held her hand around it. The light changed, and it seemed to the little girl that she was sitting in front of a big, warm fire. She watched it popping and crackling, but just as she stretched out her feet to warm them, the fire vanished, and she was left sitting with a burnt-out rushlight in her hand.

She struck her flint and lit another one. It blazed up and where the light fell on the wall next to her, she could see right through it. She saw a big table with sturdy benches. A family was sitting around the table, and the mother was dishing out a hearty helping of redfish stew into everyone's bowls. The stew smelled so good that the poor child leaned closer. Her nose touched the cold wall,

and the rushlight burned out.

So she lit another rushlight. This time she was sitting in a room lit for a feast. Rushlights shone all around her, warming her. She stretched out her hand and the lights went up and up into the sky. Her rushlight went out, and she realized that she was looking at the stars. One of the stars fell, and made a bright streak of light across the sky.

"Someone is dying," thought the little girl, for her old grandmother had told her, "When a star falls, a soul is going to the Maker."

Now she lit another rushlight, and this time she saw her grandmother in a circle of flame. She saw her clear as clear could be, looking so kind and happy.

"Grandmother," the little girl begged. "Take me with you! I'm afraid you'll vanish when the rushlight goes out!"

To keep her grandmother with her, she lit her whole handful of rushlights. A circle of light surrounded and warmed her. Her grandmother had never looked so beautiful. She lifted the little girl in her arms and together they soared away, far, far above the world, to a place where there was no more cold or hunger or pain.

In the morning, the little girl still sat there in the corner between the houses, frozen dead, with a handful of burnt-out rushlights in her hand.

The elves of the Alienage shook their heads sadly. Some said, "She must have tried to warm herself." And others added, "She's in a better place now."

Her aunt found the seven coppers in the girl's pocket and put them in her own. The morning after First Day, the rubbish men

came to take her away, for there was no money for a pyre. Her body was still frozen as they tipped her into the sea.

Silence held every man and woman in the room in its grip. Danith strode away from the group and frowned out the window, terribly upset. How could elves treat a precious child in such a way? "It must be the influence of the shemlens they live among," she muttered.

Equally upset, Alistair burst out, "That's horrible!"

Adaia's face crumpled. To forestall tears, Tara said, "You told it beautifully, but it's so, so sad..."

"Yes," murmured Leliana. "Very sad. Still, sometimes one needs a story that pierces the heart. The story is composed very well, with many fine and poignant details." She murmured to herself, "especially the falling star, which I shall use in future..."

"I think," Bronwyn ventured, uneasy at showing how much the story had moved her, "that we were all expecting the story to end with someone coming to rescue the little girl."

Adaia stared at her blankly. So did the dwarves. Brosca especially, had no problem accepting that some children would never be saved. She had seen plenty of them herself in Dust Town. Stone knew that she had nearly been one of them.

"Children die," Morrigan said coldly. "Children die every day, and the world goes on. No one can pretend it is not so."

"Then that is a scandal," pronounced Sten, his face a storm of disapproval. "A scandalous waste of your most valuable

resources. Children should not be wasted in such a way. If you southern peoples do not want your children, send them to the Qunari, and we will train them according to their abilities, and put them to useful labor."

Anders spoke up, and asked Adaia, "Do you really believe that child is in a 'better place?'"

Adaia burst out, "No! I mean... I hate that kind of talk! It makes me crazy! What kind of world is it when people say a child is better off dead?"

Uncertainly, Cullen began, "The Chantry says —"

Adaia interrupted him, "My friend Nola died begging the Maker to save her, and he didn't! She made up the story, so I leave that bit in, and it really is the sort of stupid thing people say, but I hate it!" She took a deep breath. "I hate it. It's wrong."

Zevran said softly, "*Mia bella*, your story was beautiful, and moved many hearts. That is why everyone is so stirred by it. Perhaps none of us will ever again dismiss a beggar child so easily," He bowed grandly. "I thank you."

"Yeah," Broasca agreed. "I liked that story. Usually in Dust Town the kids just starve to death, or the parents put the babies out in the Deep Roads if they can't afford to feed them." She asked Cullen, "Does freezing to death hurt?"

"It was a fine story," Bronwyn decided. "Thank you Adaia. I shall never forget it."

Alistair nudged Bronwyn, and jerked his head toward the door. Bronwyn rose, politely smiling, but still some-

what distressed.

"Teyrn Loghain!"

All her people either looked at the floor or stole little significant glances at each other; or they stared shamelessly, not wanting to miss a thing. Loghain's officers, deplorably, were only marginally better behaved. Alone among them, Ser Cauthrien was coolly impassive. Bronwyn was immensely grateful to her.

Loghain gave Bronwyn a faint smile. "They sounded the dinner bell some time ago. I thought Wardens were always hungry."

"We are always hungry, my lord," Bronwyn laughed, falling into step beside him. "I want to eat heaps."

Heaps were certainly being served, along with seemingly unlimited amounts of wine and ale. Wardens and soldiers and engineers fell to with gusto. The wine served at the head table was the good kind, too, and Loghain unbent sufficiently to permit the servant to fill his goblet for the fourth time. He was feeling uncommonly relaxed, and thoroughly enjoying the company of the young woman beside him.

Bronwyn, on the other hand, was not relaxed at all. Loghain's presence disturbed her. They were so crowded together at dinner that they touched, over and over again. When his thigh touched her it was most distracting: like little hot darts of lightning. There was a ridiculous

warmth in her belly, seeping down, luring her into mindless complacency —

She would have none of it. She was in control of herself. She was not a little elf girl to be bullied or forced by an arrogant noble; she was not a silly woman to be seduced by a cup of wine and a reputation. She had trusted him, and he had insulted her, and she had not forgotten or forgiven him. She sipped slowly at her wine, and brooded over it.

She had always been what people called "a good girl." She was the greatest prize in Ferelden — at least before she became a Grey Warden. Mother and Father had told her that, over and over again. It was important to do nothing foolish to lessen her worth. People loved to gossip, and would make up ridiculous, even malicious stories on the slightest provocation. The daughter of the teyrn of Highever must be above reproach.

Even when she was far away, she learned that people were still gossiping about her. Here and there — even from Duncan — she had heard what had been said, all those long years when she been kept from Court, proving herself a *good girl* to Father, over and over again. People had said she had borne a bastard, that she had a disgusting disease, that she had gone mad, that she was half-witted, that she was besotted with the King.

A *good girl*. She had been good — oh, yes — and it hadn't protected her reputation at all. It mattered not a particle that she listened to Mother's advice about never being

overly friendly to Rory Gilmore and the rest of the young knights and squires at Highever.

"It wouldn't be fair to them, dearest," Mother had explained. "You mustn't raise hopes you cannot fulfill. You are so pretty that it's only natural for young men to be attracted to you, and want to... kiss you. If you flirted with them, you could make them very unhappy and uncomfortable."

Gently, Mother had explained certain things about men to Bronwyn: how distressing men found it to be refused when a woman had aroused... expectations. Nice women... true noblewomen... did not do those things to men. Those were the sorts of heartless tricks used by wicked Orlesian females to manipulate men... and even other women.

"But you flirt with Father," Bronwyn had pointed out, "I've seen you get your way by teasing him and batting your eyes!" She refrained from adding "and losing your temper..."

"Your father is my husband," Eleanor Cousland smirked. "It's not like I'm making him any false promises. When you're married you'll understand."

And her tutor Aldous had played his part, too. Bronwyn loved to hear about the great women of Ferelden: about the Rebel Queen Moira, Haelia Cousland, Lady Shayna, Rowan of Redcliffe; even about Sophia Dryden before she went to the bad and induced the Grey Wardens to attack the rightful king. She learned about great women of other lands, too: the Assassin Queen of Antiva, the ruling Empresses of Orlais, the devious female magisters of Tevinter.

What successful women leaders had in common, she discovered, was that their personal lives were generally chaste – or at least appeared to be, and when they ceased to be chaste, things went rapidly downhill for them.

Soldiers, Aldous had taught her, might enjoy the company of loose women, but they generally did not respect them, nor would they follow them with the kind of blazing loyalty inspired by a young widow like Moira or an avowed virgin like Empress Blanche fleur.

Uncomfortably, she wondered how much of the virtue she prized in herself was inspired by fear: fear that she *would* bear a bastard; fear that she would disappoint her parents, or make herself a laughingstock; fear that she would be despised by her social inferiors; fear that she would lose the respect of those she led. Fear, too, that the man she allowed liberties would lose interest, or prove false, or hold her up to ridicule. It had prevented her from seeking comfort from Alistair or Cullen or any of the attractive men she commanded. She was not likely to change that now.

She studied her cup, and held on to her self-control as Loghain's thigh brushed against hers again. If he ever kissed her, and then mocked her; if she offered him her heart, and he disprized it—she would kill him. There, that was a solution. It might be ridiculous, and the result of too much wine, but the determination made her feel much, much better. If he betrayed her, she would kill him.

"This, I swear," she muttered.

Loghain, tossing the torpid Scout yet another treat, gave her a brief, puzzled glance.

After two hours of feasting and drinking, Arl Leonas Bryland was red-faced, and more than a little past his measure. Loghain regretted that he had let the man know of the plan to send Bronwyn to Denerim first. He clearly could not be trusted with wine in him.

"Call on Habren, won't you, Bronwyn? I've got a letter for her. And for my boys, too. They need to know I'm thinking of them. Werberga means well, but she lets Habren get away with too much. Their tutor is supposed to put a rein on that with Corbus and Lothar. I'll wager the boys would be thrilled to be visited by the Girl Warden..."

Werberga was his older sister. Loghain repressed a shudder. The woman had spoiled the daughter rotten, and was probably doing likewise with Bryland's young sons. The man should have married again, but word was that Werberga wouldn't have it, and had made the lives of any woman Bryland courted a living hell. She should have long ago been put in a coach and deposited at a distant manor, but Bryland was tender-hearted...

Vaughan was flushed with wine, too, and with other things, very likely. He was glaring at the Wardens, most especially at the elf girl. It was lust, certainly, but rage was there as well: rage and naked cruelty. Some people could not bear for anyone to thwart their desires. It was

not uncommon among nobles.

Quite a few of the Wardens were beyond tipsy as well. The little dwarf girl was sitting in the former Templar's lap, playing with his hair. For his part, the Templar was gazing longingly at the pretty elf mage – Tara – yes, Tara, the one Bronwyn thought so well of. She was flirting with the blond Crow assassin. His attentions were divided among nearly every female at that table, but perhaps he gave Tara more notice than the others.

The dwarf warrior Oghren's eyes were glazed, and he would probably be under the table fairly soon. The exiled dwarf princess was far more in command of herself, and was talking, quietly and forcefully, to Alistair: touching his arm for emphasis. The boy blushed every time. Loghain snorted into his goblet. Not much like his father. Maric would have had the woman in a dark corner by now. Of course, she was not an elf...

"Oh, how nice!" Bronwyn said to Bryland. "Leliana is going to sing. She's wonderfully talented."

The bard was going to sing. She had her lute with her and was strumming opening chords. Maker's Breath! She was comely creature – for an Orlesian – and had a fine voice, he supposed. Being a bard was what Bronwyn had taken her on for, after all. He scowled at the bottom of his cup, annoyed that he could not find fault. And she was singing an old Ferelden song, too. He might as well relax and enjoy it.

A holiday, a holiday,

*The first one of the year
King Arland's wife came to the Chantry
The priests' singing for to hear.
And when the chanting it was done
She went out the Chantry door
And there she saw Ser Kerran Loys,
And desired him full sore.*

*"Come home with me
Ser Kerran Loys,
Come home with me tonight.
Come home with me
My own true love,
And sleep with me tonight."*

Of course it all ended badly, with the two lovers waking to find King Arland standing at the foot of the bed. There followed a bloody duel, and the Queen pinned to the wall with the King's longsword. It was quite a beautiful song, though, and the chorus was bewitching.

*"Come home with me
Ser Kerran Loys,
Come home with me tonight.
Come home with me
My own true love,
And sleep with me tonight."*

Bronwyn toyed with her own goblet, and would not meet his eyes. She was blushing. He had a great deal to say

to her before she left in the morning, and if she was no longer hungry, then there was no more reason to remain at the table, drinking themselves into insensibility.

The song was ending, to great applause. Loghain caught Bronwyn by the hand.

"Come with me."

Her shocked face revealed that she had been listening to the song. He could not resist a brief smirk. Then he pulled himself together and rose, not letting go of her hand. "Come. I want to give you Anora's letter. And you need a secure cipher."

Most of the hall was wrapped up in private concerns, and was just this side of losing all restraint. Loghain tugged her hand again, liking the feel of it. She wanted him, did she not? They should certainly get to know each other better before she went galloping off again. She was, he admitted to himself, not just a desirable young woman, but his most important ally. He must bind her to him by any means possible.

"Bring your goblet," Loghain said. "In case you want to throw it at me again."

Bronwyn decided that he had *definitely* had too much to drink. She considered setting Scout on him, but the mabari was asleep at her feet and snoring. There was no help to be had there. Struggling against Loghain would only attract more attention. He was closer to her than a man had a right to be, and she had caught the scent of him all through

dinner: the musk of an active man, mixed with good, plain soap and the lavender his shirts were done up with. She went upstairs with him, her hand still in his.

Loghain closed the door behind them. Bronwyn very casually withdrew her hand and moved away, so nervous that she felt ready to jump out of her own skin.

How tiresome men were! And for all that he was a hero, and a splendid warrior, and even quite a bit cleverer than most people she knew, Loghain had turned out to be... a man. After a few cups of wine, men were ready to fight... or feel up the first girl that came their way. Loghain seemed to be more the latter sort.

Perhaps she was being too harsh. He did not seem the sort to force himself on just *any* girl. He had standards, presumably, since he was not gossiped about, other than in connection with Bronwyn herself.

She set her goblet down. Loghain lifted the decanter on his desk and raised his brows at her.

"I don't think either of us needs any more to drink," she said flatly.

That drew a rueful smile from him. "Perhaps not."

Loghain studied her, pushing away the wine's pleasant haze. The girl was as skittish as an ill-treated mare, wary as a trapped vixen ready to bite, glaring at him as if she expected him to make a grab for her, and clearly not liking the idea.

Fancy him she might, but she was also young, and

proud, and clearly inexperienced. Rowan had been like something like her: the Rebellion had given Arl Rendorn Guerrin's daughter plenty of practice at leadership and swordsmanship, and done nothing at all for her self-image as an attractive woman. He needed to put Bronwyn at her ease, somehow. Well, then, to business: she seemed to have no trouble with that.

He unlocked his correspondence chest. "Here is the letter for Anora. In it, I tell her that I trust you, and urge her to do likewise. I lay out the plot, and how you have thwarted it thus far. Put this letter into no one else's hands," Loghain said sternly. "It must reach her."

"So it shall," Bronwyn assured him.

"While you're at it," he said, handing her two more sealed parchments. "Here's a letter for my seneschal in the city, and another to the commander of the Palace Guard. They are loyal to me, and you can rely on them. And here," he said significantly, adding a thin parchment to the pile, "is a cipher for you to use if you need to send me a message. What else do you plan to do when you're in Denerim?"

She had thought it over at length. "After I see the Queen, I'll be largely at her disposal. Depending upon what she needs, I also hope to make a thorough survey of the Warden Compound and see what could be of use to my people. I've promised to pay a social call on my Bryland cousins. There's certainly no harm in keeping their friendship. I want to visit Master Wade and give him a

number of commissions. I have an idea for some weapons to use against dragons, and he's not afraid of innovation."

Loghain snorted, "Hardly!"

"I was thinking of a kind of short lance or spear. Something with a long tip and good penetration. Maybe something that will tangle up their feet or their wings. Also, something to help me keep my footing if I'm demented enough to jump on one again."

He gave her a dark half-smile, that for some reason filled her with confidence. He understood what she was getting at, and thought her ideas were all right.

"Then," she said, "I'll scour the libraries and bookshops of Denerim for anything about the Nevarran dragon-hunters. I can have my people do quite a bit of that. Meanwhile," she said, taking a breath, "I also want to see my brother. If I can make time to help him in any way, obviously I want to."

"Where does your brother stand in all this?" Loghain asked, light eyes fixed on hers.

"Beside me in all things. The Couslands will not endure an Orlesian marriage. Fergus will have his rightful revenge on Howe, and then bring the North in line. Chaos is what the Orlesians wanted, but he will yet see them disappointed."

He gave him a brusque nod, satisfied. It was the most he could hope for. He regretted the loss of Howe, who was a brave and cunning man. Had he not fallen prey to a bard, he would have been a valuable ally. The die was cast, however: Loghain could not have both Couslands and Howes.

He must choose wisely; and in this situation there was really no longer any choice at all. "And Alistair will lead the Wardens remaining in Ostagar. I hope he's up to it."

"I think you'll be pleasantly surprised. We've already worked a way to arrange scouting. Of course, I want to keep someone in camp at all times, unless Adaia actually goes on patrol with them."

"Adaia... also known as Melian Tabris. Vaughan won't let go of his vengeance. Do you know what the issue is there?"

"He wanted to rape her, and she got away. Her cousin and friends were not so lucky, and some of them died. He still wants to rape her, and then kill her, I suppose."

"That's her story?"

"It's easy enough to verify. She gave me the name of the priest who officiated at her wedding – the one that Vaughan broke up in his quest for 'elf whores.' I shall find Mother Boann and ask her for her version. Something else on my to-do list in Denerim. At any rate, I already believe Vaughan to be a genuinely vile human being. Yes, yes, we need him. I *understand*."

"Bronwyn," Loghain sighed. "When you know the things I know about the Ferelden nobility, you'll understand that most of them are genuinely vile human beings. Nonetheless, I'll keep an eye on Vaughan, and your little seller of rushlights as well."

He picked up his chair and moved it over to another by the fire, kicking it to face his own. "Sit with me," he said,

gesturing to the girl. He realized immediately how that sounded. "Please."

Cautiously, she sat, pressed against the back of her chair, her head cocked like a wary she-wolf. He leaned forward, hands gripping the arms of his chair, his knees nearly touching hers.

"You need to make more Wardens," he told her, very seriously. "And you need to recruit more Wardens capable of taking the initiative, not charity cases. If you find ways to jump on the back of a raging dragon, share them with your people. The duty of slaying the Archdemon is not yours alone." He saw her frown, and pressed the matter.

"Yes, I noticed that it was you who found the way to strike the killing blow against Flemeth. You told me what that means when facing the Archdemon. There is no reason why it must always be you. Do not withhold these tactics and weapons from your people, in order to protect them. They are not children. Respect them, and give them their chance at honor. For that matter, one of the mages might have got lucky with one of those concussive spells."

Bronwyn looked annoyed, and then nodded reluctantly. "You do understand that I am their leader, and that I am not going to hang back and send someone off to die simply to preserve my own life?"

"Of course I do!" he snapped. "On the other hand, you don't have to stage-manage your own death! Let the others take their chance. Take your own, for that matter, but don't treat

the sacrifice of the Wardens as your personal death sentence. What if something happened to you that would make you unable to face the Archdemon when it comes? Would you leave your people unarmed out of your own vanity?"

"Don't call me vain!" she shouted, trying to rise. He caught her wrists, holding her down.

"What would you call it? Do you believe that you are the destined Hero of legend: the only warrior of your generation capable of saving the world?"

"You make me sound ridiculous!" She glared at him, but she was not rejecting his words.

"If you were so arrogant as to believe such a thing, then you would be. I think you're a more sensible girl than that. A Grey Warden must kill the Archdemon, and in so doing, die. I understand that. It might well be you, but it might also be another. In that case, the Blight will be over, and what will you do then, Bronwyn Cousland? What will you do with yourself after the war?"

She could not bear the intensity of his gaze. "What if there is no 'then?'" she whispered. "What if there is no 'after?'"

"There always is." He gripped her harder and gave her a little shake. "There *always* is. I've been through this. I know what it's like to have your life consumed by war, and not be able to see beyond it. I know what it's like to feel that this — *this* — is the way it's always going to be. But there is a future, and you have to be ready for it. Maker knows *I* wasn't, and I was caught flat-footed when there

were no more Orlesians to skewer. But I found other duties, other ways of living. So will you."

She sighed, and her gaze drifted away into the shadows. "I will always be a Grey Warden. There is no escape."

"Yes," he agreed, very patiently, "but you will have done your duty, and can leave both leadership and active duty to others. What is Weisshaupt going to do? Send the Warden guard after you? I think not. Once the Blight is over, there is no reason you cannot make what you wish of the rest of your life." He paused, and then took the plunge. "You made a bargain with your father: one that he planned to discuss with me, I understand. Are you still interested in it?"

Shocked, she felt herself burning with embarrassment. "Who *told* you that?"

"Your cousin Bryland really cannot be trusted with information after two cups of wine. We must both remember that in future. Your father did not, and confided in him. He told me. He expected your brother Fergus to broach the matter with me months ago. In fact, he thinks your brother did so."

"Let go of me," she said suddenly. He did, and she covered her face with one hand, leaning wearily on the arm of her chair. He gave her a moment to compose herself, wondering if she had completely changed her mind. If so, it was better to face it at once.

"My father," she said, her voice muffled and bitter, "My *father* never intended to keep his word to me. Another thing I discovered in Denerim that night. He had other

plans for me — plans he preferred to my own. I do not wish to discuss them, for they are dust and ashes now. Do not speak of my father's plans."

"Then what of your own... wishes?"

She lowered her hand and looked at him, her eyes red and damp. "I wish that none of this had happened. I wish I could go home." She waved a hand, silencing the wise words ready on his lips. "I know... I know. Yes, if you are... interested, then so am I. I've already invested years and years in you, after all! It's expecting a bit much for me to start over with someone else. But," she glared at him, a single tear trailing down her scarred cheek like a glittering jewel in the firelight, "you must never, ever call my family traitors! Not ever again!"

"I understand," he murmured, reaching out to wipe the tear away, his finger stroking down the scar to the fine, firm jaw.

"I won't live more than thirty years at the most," she said.

"I don't expect that much myself," he replied.

"— and I may be barren," she whispered, acknowledging the grief of it. "It's a Warden thing."

"I have a child," he pointed out. "I am looking for a friend and a companion. A... lover," he admitted. "Not a breeding mabari. Speaking of which, do you think Scout will approve?"

"If you keep stuffing him with smoked boar," she smiled. She scrubbed at her eyes with the heel of her hand. "I

think I would like some wine, after all."

He went to his writing table, and poured the strong Antivan red into her goblet. She followed him and watched, silent and tense, her breath quick. They gravely touched their cups together, the silver ringing out a plangent note. They drank.

She hardly knew herself. After a time he took her cup away from her and set it aside. Then he moved closer, and she felt him against her, a man against a woman.

His strong arms held her fast, the heat of his body joining with hers, the pulse in his throat flickering against her mouth. Somehow his lips were testing hers, drawing her will from her. The soft sound she made must have pleased him, for the kiss deepened, lengthened, and the pressure against her became intoxicating and urgent.

"Wait," she murmured. "Wait." He looked down at her, pale eyes fierce and hungry. She licked her lips. "If you laugh at me later... if you betray me... if you forsake me, I shall stab you right through the heart."

"Of course," he agreed gently, drawing her into the darkness of his bedchamber. He must be gentle. This must go well. And she was not the first virgin to come to him, after all. "Of course. And I'd do exactly the same." The words pained him, even in this moment of victory; a memory of Maric, grief-stricken, pinning the traitor Katriel to the wall with his sword. "Right through the heart."

CHAPTER II

TO VISIT
THE QUEEN

Y LORD TEYRN!"

The shout, surprisingly, was audible above the hellish noise of Fergus' troops as they dug in

around Vigil's Keep.

He turned to hear the exultant captain's report.

"My lord, the Packtons' manor is ours! Our raid took them completely by surprise. Lady Liza and her men are prisoners, and her cousin Lord Simon is dead. We found her granaries and cellars well-stocked. The teamsters are retrieving much of the supplies even now."

"Well done," Fergus replied. "We'll be glad of it, if we're here as long as I anticipate."

He did not expect this to be easy, but the brief clash along the Pilgrim's Path yesterday had raised his men's morale. Howe had set a trap for them, but had not reckoned on Fergus expecting it, and having sent out some excellent scouts the day before. Without alerting the enemy, they had reported back, and Fergus had sent some light-armed skirmishers out to surprise Howe's men, while he

advanced with his main body.

The ambushers had themselves been ambushed, and Howe's foot soldiers were slaughtered. Thomas Howe and some of his knights had managed to break away, and there had followed a running fight north. A few brave men had sacrificed themselves; more of them were picked off by mounted archers. Fergus reckoned that only a handful had survived to reach the Vigil. He had not seen Thomas' body among the slain. Perhaps it was weak of him, but he was relieved.

Thomas had been the little tag-along brother: the one who had pestered everyone, wanting to join in all their fun. He was only a few years younger than Bronwyn, but she had managed to make herself part of the older crowd. They had never been close, but Fergus was sure that Bronwyn would not relish Thomas' death.

Nor Delilah's, for that matter. Fergus' spies were sure she was at Vigil's Keep, probably in the same tower chambers her mother had favored. Fergus wondered if some of Rendon Howe's ire had stemmed from Fergus rejecting a match with Delilah, and choosing for himself on that long, exciting journey to Antiva. Delilah was a nice girl, but marrying her would have been like marrying his sister — though without all the hot temper, swordplay, and competitive spirit, to be sure.

Howe's fortress was strong; but not so strong as Howe believed. Fergus knew the place well from childhood, and had made good use of his enforced wait in Denerim,

thinking through a workable strategy. The inner Keep was strongly fortified, but the outer works were weak: too spread out, and too dependent on a low wooden palisade. On the other hand, Howe might be well fixed for water and food: Fergus expected nothing else. They would dig in here, build counterworks, and Howe would be trapped.

In fact, Howe was trapped already. There was no backdoor to Vigil's Keep. Fergus had learned the lessons of Ostagar well, and had taken on a team of dwarven engineers, telling them that he wanted the best siege engines his money could buy. He could not hold this force together indefinitely. He must make quick progress, or his mercerial King would be wanting his troops back.

After a brief consultation, and some sketches of what was being done at Ostagar, his engineers agreed that they could devise weapons that would make Rendon Howe's life very miserable indeed, and his tenure of Vigil's Keep briefer than perhaps he had planned.

The dwarves were gloating now, smirking at the stone defying them. Their foreman approached Fergus, grinning.

"Sandstone, lord," Galtak chuckled. "The place is built of sandstone. Proof against arrows and swords, but not against dwarven wit! After a week of our trebuchets, it will melt like butter. Granite would have been trouble, but this..." he shook his head.

Fergus gave a nod at the machines they were assembling, and asked, "That's all very well and good, but will

you be ready for my signal *today*?"

"We'll earn our gold, my lord, no fear!" the dwarf gave a little bow, and went back to his men, still laughing

Howe's men were shooting from the palisades. Fergus shrugged. Let them. They were wasting bolts and arrows, and doing him no harm at all. He called for his squire.

"Tyrone!" Fergus smiled down at the eager young lad. "I'm going to change my armor. I want to look my best when I issue my challenge to Arl Howe."

In an old chest lay a suit of silverite plate, lovingly preserved and carefully reworked to fit him well. It had been worn by his father the day he refused a kingdom. It had been worn by his grandfather when he defied the Emperor of Orlais. It had been worn by his great-grandfather, Aonghas Cousland, to the tournament where he had won the heart of King Vanedrin's daughter. Fergus would wear it today. Rendon Howe would understand what it meant.

Within the hour, he was resplendent; sitting his warhorse at the outer gate of Vigil's Keep. A captain flanked him on either side; behind was his squire, holding his helmet. Above them, the banner of Highever fluttered bravely in the wind, held high by another squire.

"Rendon Howe, Arl of Amaranthine!" Fergus raised his voice to carry past palisade and curtain wall. "I, Fergus Cousland, Teyrn of Highever, your rightful lord, call you to account! I name you traitor and murderer. I name you oathbreaker and outlaw. Too long have you cowered in your

Keep, evading rightful punishment for your crimes. Come forth! Come forth and submit yourself to the King's Justice!"

A long silence, at last broken by Fergus' resonant voice.

"Rendon Howe, Arl of Amaranthine! I call you to account, in the King's name! Give yourself up, and you shall have justice. Give yourself up and your people will not suffer for your crimes. Give yourself up and your children will be spared. Prove yourself yet a man of some honor!"

Another silence. Fergus shouted, "Rendon Howe! For the last time, I call you to submit yourself to the King's Justice! Spare your vassals; spare your children; spare the kingdom the waste and evil of civil war!"

Above the wooden gate, a sneering face appeared. Howe glared down at the young man before him; the son of a man he had loved and hated and envied above all; a young man dressed in the ancient and noble armor of the Couslands: a man who should be dead.

"Young dogs bark loudest!" Howe shouted back. "Do you think me a fool, to go to my death like a sheep?"

Fergus frowned back, grim and dour. "Not like a sheep, but a shepherd: for a good shepherd will give his life for his sheep. I am here at the King's own command. Redeem your honor by your obedience to him, if for no other cause."

Howe stared at him, and finally said, "There it is, right there. That damned look in the eye that marked every Cousland success that held me back." Suddenly flushing with rage, he snatched a bow from a guardsman, and

fired an arrow. It fell short, but not by much, and thudded into the ground a few yards away from the young teyrn.

"Sit by my gates as long your like, young fool, or take yourself off. It's all one to me! I can afford to wait, and you cannot! While you are waiting, reflect on this: I threw your brat and your Antivan whore into a midden to rot. The last thing your father saw was your mother kissing my foot! Those words are all you'll have from me! I have no alms for beggars or Couslands!"

Fergus stared at him, his face gone grey. His knights watched him anxiously. One squire swore softly under his breath; the other's eyes filled with tears. With no other words, Fergus lifted his hand.

"But I am not so ungenerous," he called back. "Take this from a Cousland, and know that I have much, much more for you!"

He dropped his hand, and the waiting trebuchet creaked and thundered. A round ball of stone arced out, ponderous and massive. It struck the tall stone gate of the Keep, and splintered the top corner into a thousand shards. Howe gaped, taken aback. Fergus granted him a grave and inscrutable look, turned his horse's head, and rode away, ignoring the futile arrows falling impotently behind him.

Riding to Denerim was exhilarating. Bronwyn enjoyed the journey, glad that she could travel without disguise.

She needed to get away. She needed to think about what had happened, because clearly nothing would ever be the

same. The night before was a tangle of delight and awkwardness: nervous discomfort punctuated with bursts of intense pleasure. She had never undressed before a man, and her past glimpses of naked men had been matter-of-fact and unclouded by emotion – or had provoked fits of laughter. What had happened last night was nothing like that.

Had Loghain made a fool of her? Sometimes she thought he had, but he had also been kind – even tender. Did he imagine she belonged to him – that he could control her? She was still her own woman, but she could not deny that it had been sweet to nestle with him afterward, flesh to flesh, listening to his heart beating in the darkness.

He had wanted her to stay and sleep with him, but that was simply not tenable. She slipped from his bed, near midnight, and allowed him to help her clean herself before dressing all over again, and finding her own quarters. Fortunately, all her Wardens were already asleep or blind drunk by the time she returned. Most of them were still asleep by the time she rode away. Loghain had come to see her off, his eyes shadowed. Their public farewell was rather more decorous than the lingering kiss the night before. She needed time away from him in order to understand herself.

Her party was not as small as she had originally planned. Scout was with her, of course, and Tara, Jowan, Zevran, and Danith. Astrid had surprised Bronwyn by asking to join them. She was interested, it seemed, in seeing more of Ferelden. As she was a redoubtable warrior, it seemed

to Bronwyn that she might as well grant the woman's request. She also liked the idea of the party including a representative of the dwarves, especially when she had her audience with the King. Alistair still had a large party remaining with him at Ostagar.

It was vital that they see the Queen as soon as possible. With Tara and Jowan's handy spells, they could make the journey in three days, first resting overnight at her cousin Bryland's castle at South Reach. They had gone cross-country from Ostagar to Bryland's arling instead of sticking to the Imperial Highway, hoping to shave yet more time from the journey. The horses – and Scout – needed rejuvenation and healing from the rough trip overland, but that was what mages were for.

They arrived: and found that the King's party had gone south on the Imperial Highway only a few hours before.

"You just missed him, my lady!"

Bronwyn was both glad and sorry. It was her duty to brief the King about the progress of the alliances, but she knew that it would be difficult not to let something slip about her knowledge of his secret alliance with Orlais. Now, she could speak freely to the Queen – in private – about the plots against her, with no fear of the King interrupting their too-interesting conversation.

She had visited Castle Bryland twice before, but she had been very young at the time. It was quite old: a square, bare tower with a low curtain wall, protected on three sides by

a bend in the River Drakon, and on the east side by a deep moat and a drawbridge. It was in the process of a vigorous housecleaning, in the absence of the Arl and his family.

Cousin Leonas, of course, was still on campaign at Ostagar. Habren was swanning about Denerim, no doubt basking in her advantageous betrothal to Bann Vaughan. Cousin Leonas' two young sons were also at the Denerim mansion, keeping safe far from the darkspawn, under the gimlet eyes of their tutor and their aunt, Leonas' widowed older sister Lady Werburga.

I shall have to pay a call on them. Cousin Leonas had made a point of asking her, and he had been very kind and friendly. That was the downside of not travelling incognito. Habren was insupportable, but Lothar and Corbus were practically unknown to her. *They might be perfectly nice boys.* It was important to maintain family ties, especially since Fergus was likely to need all the support in the Landsmeet that he could get, with his teyrnir contested by Rendon Howe.

Nonetheless, the seneschal and his staff made them welcome and paid them every attention, though the current state of the Keep meant that they would not have private rooms. The cook, especially seemed happy to have guests to feed.

Before they retired for the night, Bronwyn called her people into the chamber she was sharing with Astrid, and gave them further information about the mission.

"We are not going to look for the Dalish right away. We are going to Denerim first. I have a letter for the Queen

that I must deliver. And considering our difficulties in the battle with the dragon, there is a master armorer in Denerim whom I wish to consult. We barely survived Flemeth. The Archdemon is much larger and more powerful. Obviously our current weapons won't do."

This change in plans was greeted with disappointment by Danith, and with interest by the rest. Zevran, especially, always preferred a visit to the fleshpots of civilization to camping in the wilds.

"The shemlen queen cannot wait until we meet with Zathrian's clan?" Danith asked, her voice cold.

Bronwyn looked her in the eye. "I cannot wait. I gave my word to Teyrn Loghain that I would deliver this message. Furthermore, we need supplies from the Warden Compound and to get Master Wade, the armorer, working on improved weapons for us as soon as possible."

Tara played peacemaker. "You'll find Denerim very interesting, Danith. I'm not saying you will like it, but it's very interesting all the same. Maybe this time we can get in to see the Alienage. I might have some actual relatives there!"

Everyone slept for over twelve hours. Bronwyn was up earlier than the rest, and she was not terribly surprised to be joined by Astrid.

The dwarf woman had found getting away from Ostagar to be something of a relief, even if it involved riding ill-tempered four-legged beasts at incredible speed. Everyone in the dwarven army knew who she was. Many were

sympathetic. Some were amused. Her brother's cronies were smug. Astrid had no use for any of those attitudes. It was not a very pleasant situation for her.

Therefore, a chance to get away and see more of this mysterious surface world was not unwelcome. She liked most of her fellow Wardens and found their company pleasant enough: Alistair, Cullen, and Jowan behaved to her with respect; Leliana was amusing and harmless; the elf mage was polite; the handsome blonde mage gave her no trouble, since he had eyes for not much else other than his dark-haired mage girlfriend. Danith was aloof, but her hostility to humans did not extend to those she called Children of the Stone.

In addition, the companions who had attached themselves to the Wardens were interesting people. Sten was an estimable warrior, though his beliefs made him more a curiosity to her than anything else. From what she could gather, his people, the Qunari, were regarded as a serious threat. The elf girl Adaia had no manners of any kind, but had the sense not to pester Astrid with foolish questions. The blond elf assassin was impudently gallant, but he was not particularly interested in Astrid, so the tiresome gallantry was simply a reflex, and could be ignored. The boy Carver, the new recruit, seemed eager to prove himself, and was much like any other eager young warrior.

Brosca. It was very curious, associating with a Duster as an... equal... but Brosca was brave and skilled, and clearly

well-meaning, despite her deplorably uncouth behavior. In time, she felt she could learn to live with Brosca. Oghren, strangely, bothered her much more. He was no Gorim, but sometimes associating with him tricked her into an illusion of normalcy. He was so like so many other warrior-caste types she had known. Nonetheless, her life would never be 'normal' again. She must resign herself to it.

And she had considerable respect for Bronwyn. It was not surprising that she would find common cause with another noble — even a human noblewoman from a surface land. Or perhaps it was that she was inevitably drawn to those in power...

At any rate, she would see this city of Denerim, and see for herself how the humans lived. She very likely would meet the Queen of Ferelden, and judge her palace for herself. That would be diverting.

"I hope you slept well," Bronwyn greeted her, already in the process of downing a large bowl of oat porridge.

Surfacer porridge was excellent. Astrid accepted her own bowl from a servitor with satisfaction. "Thank you, I did. My bed was very comfortable."

In fact she had found their quarters perfectly agreeable. Each of them had her own bed, and the room was spacious enough. It was still strange to see bright light slanting through the windows in the morning, but her room had a splendid view over green fields, given extra interest by the tall dark shapes in the distance that she had

learned on her journey were called the Southron Hills.

Astrid enjoyed her first spoonful, and then asked, "You don't believe that we can be in Denerim by nightfall?"

Bronwyn shook her head, intent on her own bowl. "Neither the mages nor the animals can endure a day like yesterday. With luck and the mages' spells we should be there the day after tomorrow. If the horses aren't injured. I would like to be there as soon as possible. There is much to do there. We'll stay tonight at an inn on the West Road marked on my map – The Man-At-Arms. It's supposed to be fairly nice."

Astrid studied her commander thoughtfully. "I notice that your letter to the King was not of such moment that you ordered us chase after him. With that spell the mages used, we might have caught up to him quickly."

Bronwyn gave the dwarf woman a keen look. "That is true. Everything in my letter to the King he will learn from Alistair when he arrives at Ostagar. My letter to the Queen takes precedence."

"Teyrn Loghain is the father of the Queen, is he not?"

"He is."

Astrid thought about that for a little while, while they ate their porridge in silence. Then she said, "While Grey Wardens are supposedly apolitical, it appears that that is not so much a hard-and-fast rule as it is a... guideline."

Bronwyn reached for a cup of cider. "In a perfect world, Grey Wardens could be apolitical. However, all my experiences tell me that is impossible. Simply to obtain the support

we need, I've had to play politics every step of the way. We are not numerous enough – obviously – to fight the darkspawn alone. Though all life on Thedas is threatened by the darkspawn, I've had to grant endless favors and do the bidding of kings and queen, of priests and clan chiefs. You saw for yourself what I had to do in Orzammar to get the dwarves to honor their treaty. It's like that everywhere. The King of Ferelden's support is necessary to our efforts, since the Blight is in his territory. However, I think that ultimately the skill and valor of Teyrn Loghain will be even more vital."

Astrid gave it more thought. "There is some division between the King and Queen, is there not?"

The former Aeducan princess was entirely too astute. Bronwyn hesitated, and then whispered, "There is, but she does not know it... yet."

Astrid's eyes lit up with the excitement of an Orzammar intriguer. This was the sort of thing she had missed. "Is he planning to divorce her? Or kill her?"

Bronwyn was ready to dismiss the first question, since she really did not want to talk about the subject at all, but the second question brought her up short.

"Andraste's nightgown!" She tried to look indignant, and tell the dwarf that Ferelden was not like that, but that would be a barefaced lie. Bronwyn had studied too much of her own country's history to have any illusions. She did not think Cailan capable of murder – especially the murder of his beautiful young wife. Nonetheless, ugly

things had happened in the past; in the pursuit of power, or for the greater good...

She lowered her voice. "I don't want to talk about it here, or anywhere where we might be overheard. Nothing can be allowed to disrupt our campaign against the darkspawn, and certainly not the personal affairs of kings. We must put a stop to anything that threatens the war effort."

That made perfect sense to Astrid. "Absolutely. I am looking forward to our time in Denerim. Would it be possible for me to be presented to the Queen?"

"I don't see why not..."

Tara came bounding down to breakfast, followed by Zevran, who was trying to flirt with a sullen Danith; and far behind, a quietly cheerful Jowan. The mage had not slept so well in... well, ever. At least he had once Zevran had gone to sleep and stopped quizzing Jowan about which of their companions he found most beautiful.

Bronwyn's polite queries about their rest were met by assurances — except for Danith.

"The bed was too soft," she declared ungraciously. "It felt like I was sinking into a pool of mud."

"How trying for you," Bronwyn said, on the edge of hard words. Zevran winked at her, and she managed to smile in spite of herself.

The breakfast was also not to the Dalish elf's satisfaction. Tara asked her all about the Dalish diet, which distracted Danith into a long lecture about the benefits of

hallenansal, a soft, pudding-like substance made from the fermentation of halla milk. From Danith's description, it was not quite cheese.

"No, we do not add salt," she said stiffly, in response to Tara's question. "Excessive salt is unhealthy. Shemlen eat far too much salt. Hallenensal is eaten plain, or with fruit gathered from the forest. It is also sometimes sweetened with honey."

"In Ostwick I had clotted cream," Bronwyn said. "It's like a thickened milk, and it has a natural sweetness —"

" — The Gift of the Halla is far superior to anything made from the milk of shemlen beasts of burden," Danith declared, with cool satisfaction.

"I'm sure it's delicious," Tara said soothingly. "and very wholesome."

Zevran gave them all a dazzling smile. "I have some acquaintance with it myself. In my time among the Dalish we had hallenansal for breakfast every day. And for supper. And for snacks. Sometimes it was mixed with herbs or with shredded raw fish. Or with roots and berries. Or seeds and nuts. Every day." The dazzling smile became a trifle glazed.

Bronwyn was amused back into composure.

Soon they were on their way, and Bronwyn considered where they should stay once they were in Denerim. There was the Warden Compound, of course, which she was eager to see for herself.

On the other hand, she could also stay at Highever House,

which would be a little like home. She had not been there in years – not since Cailan and Anora's wedding – but she remembered it well. There was a room there that was hers, and might even have some things of hers stowed away.

No, it would have to be the Warden Compound. She was making an official visit, in her official capacity. Highever House was really Fergus's now, and she could not in good conscience bring guests there without his permission. Furthermore, the Compound was part of the Palace, and she would have easier access to the Queen. If time permitted, she would visit Highever House and look for anything belonging to her.

They were all exhausted by the time they clattered into the outer courtyard of the Palace. The Man-At-Arms Inn had been more than a bit grubby, and dealing with excited gawkers had been an irritant Bronwyn had not anticipated. Worse still was the innkeeper's assumption – which Bronwyn had taken some pains to correct – that Tara, Zevran, and Danith were servants, who would make do with pallets on the kitchen floor. Girl Warden or not, the innkeeper was not happy about elves in his best rooms, and had charged accordingly. Really, it was positively foul how some people treated elves...

There was impudent curiosity about Danith's clan tattoos, and even a few murmurs about "heretics." Bronwyn breathed a deep sigh of relief when she realized that Danith simply did not know what the people were talking

about. The Dalish elf was too distracted, anyway, by her disgust at the "dirty, greasy" food they were served.

Worse still, the mages' staffs were a giveaway, and a number of country people had given them fearful looks and then slunk away, whispering among themselves. A pair of Templars arrived very early in the morning to investigate the rumors of "apostates on the loose." Ser Filian and Ser Bors had been very polite, but they had their duty to perform. They demanded a signed statement from Bronwyn, affirming that these mages were Grey Wardens, and traveling on official business under the supervision of their commander. There was nothing in the Grey Warden treaties that gave the Chantry had the right to ask for anything of the sort, but it was sign the statement, waste time arguing, or simply kill the men. She quietly vowed to camp in future, or stay at the castles and manors of people whose hospitality and good breeding she trusted. Or perhaps the Grey Wardens needed to purchase some strategically-located land for a few bases around Ferelden.

And she would have to think of some way to make her mages look less like... mages. Jowan and Tara would wear light armor in future. With griffons on it. The Warden tabards were not well-known enough in Ferelden to deflect attention or garner respect. And surely there was a way to disguise a mage's staff. Could it be made to look like a longsword, or a spear? Did it have to be so bloody *conspicuous*?

As they neared the city, their progress was hindered by

the thin but steady stream of refugees making their way along the West Road up to Denerim. Bronwyn sighed with relief at the sight of the spire of Fort Drakon.

No one was expecting them at the Warden Compound, and there was a tiresome wait until the grooms made their appearance to take the horses to the stables. Danith looked about, scowling at the great stone pile. How could shems choose to live with nothing green in sight?

Things improved considerably after that, however. Mistress Rannelly, the Warden's housekeeper, peered out of the Warden's entrance and gave a little squeal at the sight of their tabards. She ducked back inside and Bronwyn could hear her issuing quick, excited orders to the staff.

Alistair had told her about the woman. She really did look something like a cottage loaf: soft and comforting. Her face might be lined with age, but her eyes were bright as a young woman's, and she bustled out to greet her Wardens with a broad smile.

"The Girl Warden!" she exclaimed, taking Bronwyn's hand in one of her own and patting it all the way to the door. "You are the Girl Warden, aren't you? And your fine mabari, too! We've all heard about Scout! I'm Peridota Rannelly, and oh, I'm so glad you've come at last. We've been quite bereft here, grieving over our Duncan and all our poor boys. He recruited you, didn't he? I thought so. Such an eye for the best, our Duncan had. Oh, introduce me to all our new Wardens! Tara — such a pretty

name. You are so young, my dear! Have you been getting enough to eat? Well, well, you'll find no such trouble in the Wardens' Hall! Danith! Am I pronouncing it right? Danith. Duncan so wanted to recruit more Dalish elves. He had such a high opinion of the Dalish, did Duncan. You are very welcome here. Jowan. Another mage? That's very exciting. The Wardens need all the mages they can get! You look tired, my boy. I have a tonic that will set you right — Zevran! Not a Warden? Oh, well... Nobody's perfect, and I'm sure you'll come around soon. Astrid! Duncan always said the dwarves made wonderful Wardens. Don't worry about your boots, my dear: Toby will see to them, and we can have the floor scrubbed again in a jiffy. Such a lot of Girl Wardens, really! I've never seen the like. Well, a new broom sweeps clean. How is our Alistair? A sweet boy and a dab hand with a sword and shield, too. Oh my, second-in-command... I suppose someone has to be. Warden-Commander, you'll want to see the accounts, and there is a pile of letters in the study for you, but what am I saying? You don't know where the study is, do you? The Commander's room is adjoining. We stored our poor Duncan's things in the west attic. Some of them, anyway... We'll have beds done up for your in a trice and food on the table. I suppose you'll want baths as soon as may be. Not that you're so *very* dirty, but still..."

Bronwyn let the tidal wave of words wash over her. It was pleasant, really, to be fussed over. It reminded her of home...

of Nan — though Nan's fussing would have been mixed with more pointed criticism of Bronwyn's current appearance.

"Baths would be wonderful, Mistress Rannelly. I need to apply for an audience with the Queen as soon as possible, but I certainly can't go before her as I am now."

"Certainly not," the housekeeper agreed. "The Wardens have standards to maintain. The Queen is not well, poor soul, but I have no doubt she'll see you. The King left only three days ago, you know..."

"Yes, we missed him on the way, but I promised Teyrn Loghain to give Her Majesty a letter..."

"Well, give Tamsin the gown you're to wear, and she have it brushed and pressed for you by the time you're clean enough to wear it!"

Bronwyn paused. "Actually, I don't have a gown. I'll wear my clean breeches and a fresh shirt. If a clean tabard could be found, that might be a good idea."

"Of course we can find you a tabard, but..." the good woman looked a bit flustered. "We have far more in the storerooms for men than women, but surely there is *something* suitable. Why don't I have a look, while you're taking your bath? But first, let's get you all something eat. I know about Warden appetites! We always have some soup on the simmer in the kitchens, just in case..."

As they walked, Bronwyn took the opportunity to look around. The entrance to the Warden Compound was a low, arched doorway. A barrel-vaulted passage of stone

led past an empty guard post and some closed doors, and then into a kind of ante-room, furnished only with a candlestand and a bench for waiting visitors. A maid-servant, running ahead, pushed the doors open on a high, wide, and airy chamber. The lofty ceiling boasted heavy beams, and from them, silken pennants dangled down: standards of the nations of Thedas, of noble houses, of the Grey Wardens. A long table, rubbed and polished into a mellow shine, ran down the middle of the room with benches on either side. A splendid chair whose arms and feet were carved into griffon's claws was placed at the far end. A portrait decorated the wall on either side of the fireplace. Even at this distance, Bronwyn could recognize one of them as that of Duncan.

"The refectory, Warden-Commander," Mistress Rannelly said, with a proud gesture. Her eyes dimmed in a moment of grief. "We put up our Duncan's picture just as soon as we heard. And we moved Commander Genevieve's picture from the study, so the two of them could look down at the Hall. It seemed right and proper, somehow."

So that was Warden-Commander Genevieve of Orlais, who had brought the Grey Wardens back to Ferelden. Bronwyn went closer to have a look. It was not a very good portrait, being too generic to tell much about the woman herself. For that matter, it had probably been painted after her death by someone who had never met her.

The woman in the portrait was certainly not very glam-

orous. The portrait showed a stern, middle-aged face, pale and worn, under short-cropped, no-nonsense grey hair. The burden of duty had carved deep lines around her eyes and mouth. The background was dark and shadowy, reminiscent of the Deep Roads where Genevieve had met her end, leading a mysterious mission that had included King Maric himself. Nothing much was known about the mission. It occurred to Bronwyn that Teyrn Loghain, the confidant of the king, might be the only one left who knew anything about what had happened. She must remember to ask him. She felt herself blush hotly, thinking of him.

Her people had scattered and were themselves looking about; admiring the weapons stands and the armor stands and the various curiosities on display. Tara was in conversation with a busy elven maid, and they were both gesticulating in an excited way. Bronwyn smirked. At least Tara was gesticulating: the maid was attempting to set the table and serve them a meal. Tara then drew Danith and Astrid into the conversation.

Mistress Rannelly led Bronwyn to a door off the refectory. There was another, much shorter passage. At one side was a narrow spiral staircase leading both up and down: on the other was an arched doorway.

"There's the study, Warden-Commander dear," said the woman. "And through that door beyond is your bedchamber. I'll just open them up right now. There."

The study was more than that: it was filled with book-

cases, chests, and cupboards. In addition to a big desk, the room was furnished with a settee in front the fireplace, and a chess table was pushed up against the wall, with chairs set primly on two opposing sides. From the curved wall to the outside, it was clear that the room was a section of a round tower. Two arched windows lit the room brightly. The sills were deep enough to curl up in with a good book. There was no reason not to share this pleasant place with her companions. The desk, she saw, had a lock for anything that needed to be kept secret. Most of the cupboards and chests could be locked as well.

The adjoining bedchamber was smaller, and furnished simply and without ostentation. Still, it was hers by right, and hers alone. Scout trotted ahead of her, sniffing.

"— and Niniel will make up the bed for you and put away your things. We'll find a warm blanket for your mabari. I thought that we could make up two of the rooms here in the tower for the others, rather than opening up that big drafty dormitory. How long will you be staying?"

"I'm not sure," Bronwyn told the housekeeper, distracted by her pleasure at having a private room. "It largely depends on the Queen. Not more than a few days, I expect. You said Her Majesty was unwell..."

The older woman sighed deeply. "Off her food, she was. We hoped we knew what that meant, but we were wrong. Under the weather, she is, and the King riding away, merry as you please, to see the elves! Of course, there is a war on and we

all have to sacrifice, but it's a heavy burden on her, poor lass."

Bronwyn thought quickly, "Send one of your people to the seneschal directly, to inform Her Majesty that I am here with dispatches from Ostagar. Meanwhile, I shall try to make myself fit to be seen..."

She caught the fragrance of cooked food, and ducked out of the room quickly. Whatever it was, it smelled very good. Fruit was heaped on a huge silver salver, and crusty bread in baskets. To her surprise, her people were standing by the benches up near the grand Commander's chair, and they were waiting for her...

Tara grinned. "Tamsin informed us that we weren't to sit down until the Commander did. She was scandalized at our greedy manners!"

"Then I'm sorry to keep you waiting," Bronwyn laughed, and after a brief moment of hesitation, seated herself in the Commander's chair. Instantly her five companions thumped themselves down on the benches and were eagerly devouring bowls of good pea soup.

Afterwards, Mistress Rannelly herself scrubbed Bronwyn's filthy hair, and then patiently combed through the tangles. It took some time to have enough hot water for everyone, but the pleasure of proper baths put even Danith in a mellower mood.

"And we found you a gown!" The housekeeper towed Bronwyn's hair again, anxious to get it dry before the royal summons came. "Tamsin, show the Warden-Commander what was in the stores!"

Bronwyn caught her breath as yards of the most shimmering, sumptuous grey velvet was spread out on her bed for her examination.

"We had our work cut out for us to find something that would fit a tall, broad-shouldered lady like yourself, but there was this, and I don't think it has ever been worn. It was brought from Orlais by Commander Genevieve twenty years ago, but you see it's like new!"

Bronwyn put out her hand to stroke the fabric. It was the finest Orlesian silk velvet: the costliest of dress fabrics. Either Genevieve had been independently wealthy, or, more likely, she was a warrior whose concessions to pomp and ceremony went only as far as having the one gown, but that one the best to be had.

The Orlesian style would have been strange to Ferelden eyes twenty years ago, but was now pretty much what was worn by all Fereldan woman who could afford it. Heavy silver braid trimmed the high neck, accented the shoulders, and finished off the sleeves. The skirt of the gown was straight and split in four parts, much like a Warden's tabard, with the splits in front over the thighs. The bodice was embroidered in silver, picked out with black, with a griffon, wings outspread. This was not just a woman's only gown, it was the gown of a woman who defined herself totally as a Grey Warden.

Tamsin had found all the rest of the trimmings that went with it: a double belt, black velvet set with crystal,

and a black silk underskirt.

"I could simply wear my breeches and boots under it —" Bronwyn began to suggest, and then saw the look in the other women's eyes. She desisted. She could wear it as it was meant to be worn, at least this once. Once her hair was dry enough to be braided up — more elaborately than her usual style — they set about lacing her into the gown, and adjusting the fit with pins.

"Commander Genevieve was broader in the chest and hips than you, my dear, but of course she was no longer a young girl," Mistress Rannelly remarked. "And her preferred weapon was a greatsword. That certainly puts muscle on anyone, man or woman! I'll take a few stitches in the dress tonight, and it will fit you like it was made for you."

"Let me see!" Tara cried. She peeked into the room, barefoot, in a man's too-big shirt, her own hair sopping wet. "You look splendid!"

Astrid was waiting for Danith to finish in the bath, and came to look as well; carefully not touching anything in the clean room. It would be good to bathe again. She admired the dress in a more measured way.

"It's as much a... uniform... as a gown," she judged.

"True," Bronwyn agreed. "It's very official-looking, but for my audience with the Queen, that's all to the good."

She studied herself in the long Tevinter mirror, and decided she liked what she saw. The length was a sensible one: the gown's skirt ended just above her ankles. The

underskirt could be adjusted to the same length, or pulled down to sweep the floor. She liked her hair too, and paused, regretting the indelible scar. At least her hair covered it somewhat. She liked the sensation of being dressed up once again so much that she was reluctant to take the dress off.

That proved to be convenient, for the royal summons soon arrived, and Bronwyn set off for the front gate of the Palace, feeling feather-light without her armor and a layer of grime.

Anora looked up wearily at the quick sound of boots on stone. They came to an abrupt stop at the door of the Little Audience Chamber, and there was muttered conversation. It all made her head buzz painfully.

"Majesty," murmured Erlina, "It is the Grey Warden."

"Send her in here," Anora whispered, trying not to aggravate her headache. "I don't need to leave my sitting room for Bronwyn Cousland."

Anora had been dully surprised by the message that the Grey Warden Bronwyn was in Denerim and requesting an audience. Everything was so difficult nowadays. What did the Girl Warden want? Everyone always seemed to want something. Perhaps she had brought a letter from Father. The idea irritated her further. The gossip about the two of them, dutifully related by Erlina, was *scandalous*. What was Father thinking, carrying on so? The thought of Father carrying on with anyone was disturbing enough, but doubly so with a girl younger than his daughter! Father had been

alone so long that he should be used to it by now.

"The Commander of the Grey, Your Majesty," a guard announced quietly. He had a soothing voice. Anora would make sure he stood guard at her rooms more often.

She was a little startled by the person bowing, then advancing toward her. This woman bore little resemblance to the Bronwyn Cousland she knew. She had grown taller and older, certainly, and she was almost gaunt, with a serious expression that was not at all like Fergus Cousland's lop-sided, endearing grin. She had alarmingly green eyes that surely Anora would have remembered. For a brief, frightening instant she believed that an assassin had penetrated the Palace.

But the tall figure in the grey velvet gown blazoned with a griffon merely bowed again.

"Your Majesty. I come from Ostagar with news of the campaign and a private letter from Teyrn Loghain."

Anora stared at her for a moment, and then extended a pale, languid hand for the letter.

She read, her befogged brain struggling with the code. Then she read it again. It was the most distressing letter she had ever received.

Cailan was planning to divorce her. He was planning to divorce her and marry the Empress of Orlais, the most glamorous woman in the world.

Had she not been so weak and miserable, the little moan of despair would not have escaped her. But it did, and Bronwyn started forward in concern.

"Your Majesty –"

"Sit!" It was rude, but Anora was too wretched to care about her manners. "You know the contents of this letter. You brought my father the evidence. He credits it."

"Your Majesty, this should be private –" The green eyes glanced sharply at Erlina, waiting demurely for Anora's commands.

"I trust Erlina implicitly—" Anora paused. This was too serious a matter, and while Anora knew and trusted Erlina, Bronwyn did not, and might not speak freely if Erlina remained in the room. "Erlina," she said instead, "fetch my tea. The Commander will join me."

The maid seemed displeased, but left the room. Bronwyn took the moment to speak. "Yes. I regret to tell you it is all true. I brought the wedding treaty to your father. The King believes that it is on its way to Orlais." She spoke quickly, giving the Queen the affair in brief, not dwelling on the murder of Marjolaine, but not pretending it had never happened, either. She mentioned the Orlesian plot to kidnap Alistair and herself, at which Anora raised her brows and then nodded thoughtfully.

"Yes... Alistair is Cailan's bastard brother. The son of a serving maid. I have heard of him."

That Alistair's mother was a Grey Warden, and no serving maid was none of Anora's business, so Bronwyn did not dispute her words.

"Marjolaine was also the agent who lured Rendon Howe into murdering my father. Her goal was to destabilize the

north, just as the south of Ferelden is under attack by the darkspawn. She seems to have succeeded."

"Your brother took his forces north four days ago," Anora told her. "His men have invested the area around Vigil's Keep, and he has sent his challenge to Howe."

Bronwyn sighed, wishing she could have seen him first... wishing she could be with him. "Maker give him strength," she said. She looked at the white-faced woman opposite her, and said, "And you, too, Majesty. I am sorry to see you so unwell. When did this illness come upon you?"

"About ten days ago," Anora replied, no longer bothering to pretend she was perfectly well. "It has rather crept up on me..." She paused. She was not a fool, even with her brain in a fog. She was not a fool...

Bronwyn was staring at her, alarmed, the poison-green eyes boring into hers. Perhaps she, too, had realized that Anora began feeling ill shortly after the King had signed a treaty setting her aside...

"No..." Anora whimpered.

The maid appeared with the tea tray: her trusted, valued Erlina. "Your tea, Majesty."

Anora reached out a trembling hand, and clutched at the fragile little cup. Such a delicate thing... She looked up into Erlina's face, and saw something she had missed.

The cup fell to the floor, scattering shards of painted Orlesian porcelain.

CHAPTER 12



A VERY IMPORTANT ERRAND GIRL

ERLINA DID NOT GET FAR WHEN SHE TRIED TO RUN. Bronwyn took her prisoner without even soiling her fine new gown.

Jowan healed the burns from the explosive powder hurled in Bronwyn's face. Now, she stared at the bound elf before her, grim and purposeful. True to her bardic training, Erlina's bruised face was a mask of calm and control. She understood that she was going to die, and had accepted it. That was the price of failure, and a fair one. She had not counted on the speed or strength — or the resistance to pain — of the Girl Warden.

"I strongly advise you," Bronwyn began, herself calm and controlled, "to tell us everything you know. Your contacts; when and where they took place; the Orlesian plans you are privy to; your speculations on the same. Everything. It is very much in your best interests to do so."

Erlina was silent. Bronwyn was silent too, looking at her.

The room was a bare stone chamber in the Wardens' Compound. It had once been a bedchamber, but had been



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abruptly cleared out, and now it contained only a table, two chairs, parchment and ink. The only window was high in the wall, and far too narrow for even a slender elf to wriggle through. In the back of the room was a plain bench, where lounged Zevran Arainai, listening very carefully.

Erlina's attempt to flee had confirmed her treason. Bronwyn had instantly called in her mages and Zevran, who had identified the poison in the little container by the tea things.

"Inheritance powder," he said, with a wry laugh. "It is used in Orlais, and also in Antiva. I suspect it is used all over Thedas, but sparingly. It is expensive — very expensive — and thus only used for important targets. A large dose mimics a stroke: a little causes a slow decline, so one can say that the target was sickly and like to die."

"Expensive, you say?" Bronwyn asked. She had never heard of this poison.

"The *most* expensive!" Zevran assured her. "The active ingredient is not even found in Thedas, but in a land to the far north, beyond Par Vollen. As that is now held by the Qunari, it is almost impossible to obtain. This poison can only be commanded by the wealthiest King!"

"— or Empress," Bronwyn said. Zevran gave her a little bow of assent.

"Do you know what the punishment is for one who would compass the death of the Queen of Ferelden by poison?"



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Bronwyn asked Erlina.

The elf gave a little shrug. It was ridiculously obvious. Of course the punishment was death.

Very quietly, Bronwyn went on: "The punishment was decreed by King Arland, over two hundred years ago. He was a harsh man, was King Arland. A barbarian, you Orlaisians would describe him. A barbarian ruling over a barbarous and turbulent people. There were many attempts to dethrone him, but King Arland died in his bed. After awhile, the attempts had ceased, you see, because his punishments were such that no one would take the risk."

She folded her hands and cocked her head, using her disturbingly green eyes to intimidate the elf.

"A cook was suborned by some of Arland's enemies to poison him. Not a bad plan, as King Arland was a notorious glutton. The plan, however, was discovered, and the cook captured. It was then that King Arland, in rage and fear, decreed that anyone who poisoned or attempted to poison the monarch should suffer a punishment appropriate to a treacherous cook..." She let the words drift into the silence. Erlina sat very still.

"The false servant was stripped naked. The hair of his head and body was shaved, and he was drawn through the streets of Denerim thus in a high cart, with a placard above naming him traitor and poisoner. The people of the city pelted him with curses and with filth, and followed the cart eagerly to the place of execution appointed: the Market

Place, where stands had been erected for the nobles and the wealthy, that they might see the sight. It is said that the other folk climbed to the tops of houses to see the better.

"The place of execution was a pyre: but not one for the malefactor to be burnt upon. The fuel was charcoal, to prevent too much smoke that might mercifully smother a victim before the flames reached him. Instead, a great caudron was set upon the almost smokeless fire: the kind of cauldron used in butchering many boars at a time. There was water in the cauldron. Cold water."

Her face impassive, Bronwyn said, "The malefactor was enclosed in a kind of iron cage, to keep his head from dipping down under the water, and escaping the full penalty of the law by drowning himself. The cage was lowered into the water, and the water slowly heated to boiling. It took many hours. From time to time the cage was lifted from the bubbling water to see the skin sloughing from the agonized body. This prolonged the criminal's suffering. King Arland was very interested in seeing what the punishment would look like."

Erlina's eyes were red and glittering. A thin trail of snot trickled down from her nose. Bronwyn paused and studied her.

"The Queen, as you have cause to know, is a kind and just woman. Even though you have betrayed her in the worst of ways, she is no monster who delights in the torture of others, unlike those who could watch her suffering and eventual death with complacency. Nor will I soil my hands

with hot irons or the rack. Two choices lie before you."

Erlina sniffed almost inaudibly.

"Make no mistake: you will die for your treason. It lies with you whether you suffer or not. If you display true penitence by telling us everything you know, I give you my word that the Queen will permit you a strong draught of sleeping potion, and you will slip from life to death without pain. If you prove recalcitrant and hardened, you will suffer the full penalty of the law, and there is no soft-hearted King in Denerim to prevent it. I will leave you to your thoughts. You have one hour to decide. Come, Zevran."

The former Crow stretched lazily, rising from the bench. "Warden-Commander, if I may... could I have a word with the prisoner? Perhaps she will listen to reason if someone not so... imposing... were to urge her."

"As you like," Bronwyn nodded. Indeed, this had been the plan all along. She left the room, and made sounds as if going away, then quietly returned and listened at the door.

Zevran sat down by Erlina, relaxed and smiling sympathetically. He suspected the Erlina knew the ruse, but under such a penalty, she would be desperate for anything resembling pity.

"My charmer," he said gently. "I think you should reconsider any hint of loyalty you may be feeling to your former employer. And cast aside professional pride as well, for it will not cool you in boiling water."

Erlina whimpered and turned her head, not trusting



herself to speak.

Zevran, not unkindly said, "I attempted the life of the Girl Warden herself, and managed to speak quickly and well enough to turn her anger. As I told her then, I was not paid for silence. Were you? No. You were a tool, and a useful one; but your mistress is far away and would not admit she knows your name, and your colleague Marjolaine is dead."

"Dead?" A long, despairing sigh.

"*Si, carina.*" Zevran said, "I was there. She was questioned, killed, and her papers seized. The Queen knows all, now. She cannot spare your life after what you have done. Had you thrown yourself on your knees before her, instead of throwing flash powder in the Warden-Commander's face, perhaps. Perhaps. But it is too late now. As my commander says truly, what you can choose is the manner of your own death. Choose wisely, I beg you. Choose for yourself, and not for others, who do not care how your suffer."

A low whisper. "And will she keep her word?"

"She always has. I myself will see that you receive the sleeping draught... if you earn it."

After a few minutes, she began to speak. Zevran dipped the quill into the ink and wrote quickly, catching every word.



Anora felt much better after the Warden mage's attentions. He was a mild-mannered, not ill-favored fellow, and spoke gently to her, explaining that he was using spells for Healing and Rejuvenation. Erlina's poison had done



her great harm, and when pressed to say if the harm were permanent or not, he grew flustered. Anora shut her eyes, just wanting to know the truth.

She did not have it until Bronwyn heard it from Jowan himself, and then told the Queen.

"No, Your Majesty. There is no cure. The damage to your vital organs was irreversible. You cannot be fully healed, but Jowan feels that daily treatments will keep you feeling well and able to perform your duties."

"For how long?"

Bronwyn bit her lip. "We don't know. For over a year, possibly, perhaps more." The look on Anora's face wrung her heart. She hurried on. "We can meanwhile call in other, more experienced Healers — very discreetly. The Healer Wynne, who is now serving at Ostagar. is quite brilliant, and would know what to do if anyone does. She saved my brother's life, after all." She thought a little more. "I must go to the Dalish soon, but if it suits you, Majesty, I will leave Jowan here for you, with the story that he is convalescing from wounds and will perform the necessary administrative duties at the Compound as our liaison with the Crown. That way, he can call on you daily for your necessary healing."

"Yes." Anora nodded, clutching at the arms of her chair. "We shall do that. Jowan will stay here, and I shall write to my father, requiring the services of this Wynne. She can be trusted, do you think? The King cannot know of this..."



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Her heart almost failed her. *Unless he knows already...*

The Wardens sat over a late supper, talking about it all. "I wish we had those Ashes of Andaste that the good brother was looking for," Tara said. "They'd cure the Queen right away!"

"What ashes?" Astrid asked. She scowled, puzzled, at Bronwyn. "What is she talking about?"

When Bronwyn did not instantly answer. Danith said, "You are speaking of the Andraste who freed the slaves? She whom the shemlens worship? The friend of Thane Shartan?"

"Yes," Bronwyn allowed. "That Andraste. Near Lake Calenhad, we met a traveling scholar who believed he knew where the ashes were enshrined. They are rumored to possess miraculous curative powers."

Jowan muttered, "It would *take* a miracle to cure the Queen!" He wished he could do more for her. She was so beautiful and so sad. How could anyone do such a thing to her? And people thought *blood mages* were monsters.

Astrid had heard of Andraste, generally when humans were cursing; and the Shaper of Memories said that the evidence indicated that she had actually existed. The Tevinters believed her to have been a powerful mage, though apparently that opinion was deeply offensive to all other humans in Thedas. She remarked, "If those ashes really had such powers, they would be a mighty prize indeed."

Bronwyn paused, a little shocked at the idea of Andraste's remains being considered a "prize." So too were



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Tara and Jowan, who had been forced to attend chapel services every day of their lives in the Circle.

After that first shock, Bronwyn forced herself to be rational about it. "Brother Genetivi was highly regarded by another scholar of the Chantry to whom I once spoke — a Sister Justine. She felt that he was a serious and learned person — and one who investigated the truth whether it was politically acceptable to those in power or not. When Tara and I visited his house to see if he had returned safely, we discovered an intruder there: someone who had murdered the brother's servant and had gone through his papers. Someone was very interested in the brother's researches, which tends to make me believe there was something to them."

"Were the papers taken?" Astrid asked, intrigued.

"No. We have them in the Wardens' secret cache." Zevran was not there, so Bronwyn could speak freely. "In a warehouse in the Market District, there is a secret stash of weapons and notes in case anything should happen to the Compound. You should all know how to access it. It would also do as a hiding place for Wardens in the worst case."

"How distant is this supposed shrine?" Astrid asked, frowning over the idea. "Is it in Thedas?"

"Yes!" Tara burst out excitedly. "It is right here in Ferelden, though west in the Frostbacks. Bronwyn marked it on our map!"

"No." Bronwyn shook her head. "What I have marked on the map is the location of a village where Brother Genetivi believed he could learn the location of the shrine — or



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funerary temple, as he called it. We have the darkspawn to fight, and that must be our first priority. However, if time and resources can be found, perhaps an expedition to this village, called Haven, can be organized."

"Wouldn't that be an adventure!" sighed Tara. "I think we should find out what happened to Brother Gentivi anyway. He was a nice man."

"I need to visit the Cathedral," Bronwyn agreed. "I can speak again to Sister Justine, as well as Mother Boann. She is the priest who officiated at Adai's wedding. I want to confirm her story with a witness, for additional protection against Bann Vaughan."

"That is well and good, but how much longer must we stay here?" Danith wondered, more than a little grumpily. Personally, she thought the shemlen rapist needed a arrow in the eye. That would solve Adai's problems rather neatly.

It was a fair enough question. "We must settle things with the Queen, as far as possible, and I have several errands," Bronwyn told her briskly. "First of all, I want all of you to know how to get into the cache. We will go to the Market District. Most of our errands are there, anyway. We'll visit the cache, and then see if Brother Genetivi has returned. We will visit the armorer Master Wade, improve our current equipment, and discuss some custom weapons for dragon-fighting. There is no armor here in the Compound that is small enough to fit Tara, other than the helmet Tamsin found, and I want Tara to have something



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sturdier than robes."

"There might be something at Zathrian's camp," Danith pointed out.

Tara tried not to make a face. She found the idea of wearing revealing Dalish armor a very uncomfortable one. Baring her midriff in all weathers was a chilly prospect. It was all very well for Danith, since she was *used* to it.

Bronwyn did not want to argue with Danith about it. "If we find anything there we will purchase it. In the meantime, I want Tara to be protected now. It might be some days before we reach Zathrian's clan, and we might run into danger before then." She went on, listing her errands. There were such a lot of them. The late Paragon Branka had sneered at her in the Dead Trenches, calling her an 'important errand girl.' At the moment, it was only too true.

"I have some kin in town whom I am obliged to visit. I will go to the Cathedral and interview the priests. Not all of you will want to go there, but there is much of interest to see in the Market, and before we start tomorrow morning, you will all be paid your stipend so you have coin in hand."

"Stipend?" Jowan looked up, interested.

"Yes," Bronwyn was pleased to tell him. "Grey Wardens are due money every quarter. Since Grey Wardens lead risky lives, they are paid on the first day of the quarter for the quarter – not at the end of the quarter, like most people. Even if you have not been a Warden for a full quarter, or you Joined before a quarter's holiday, you are due a sum

for the days of service. I shall make the calculations and give you your pay in the morning.”

Her Wardens went quite happily to their beds. Bronwyn stayed in the study, reading through the pile of correspondence on the desk.

There were so many letters! The most important seemed to be letters to Duncan from Weisshaupt, wanting to know the progress of the Blight. Bronwyn began arranging them by the dates they were sent. There were letters from other Grey Wardens around Thedas, the largest number of which were from Orlais. She had not the time to read them all. There were also letters to Duncan that appeared to be of a personal nature. Eventually, she would have to do something about them as well.

She broke the seal on the most recent official letter from Weisshaupt. The griffon seal, in grey wax, was large and heavy. The letter, surprisingly, was directed to her – “Grey Warden Bronwyn.”

We have heard of the deaths of Warden-Commander Duncan and the annihilation of the Grey in Ferelden. You and your fellow Junior Warden, Alistair, are hereby commanded to travel to Montsimmard and report to Peyrolle, Warden-Commander of Orlais, for further instructions.

First Warden Wildauer

Bronwyn frowned over it briefly, and then filed it away with the rest. Go to Orlais, indeed! The First Warden could bloody well send her some Wardens, instead.

She updated the Warden enlistment rolls and then went through the accounts. Everybody still alive was owed money. She tried to recall the dates of recruitment as well as possible to make the proration of the period prior to the first full quarter of service as precise as possible.

“Thank you, Mother,” she whispered. How she had *hated* learning accounts. Eleanor Cousland, however, had taught her that the one thing she must not be sloppy about was paying people correctly. Any mistakes there would be caught, and cause hard feelings or worse.

According to Duncan, Zevran, too, as a Grey Warden “auxiliary” was due a set sum. The base pay was less than that of the Wardens themselves, but he had been with her longer than some of the others, and thus the actual amount paid would be higher than that of her three most junior Wardens.

Then, though she would have preferred to go to bed, she steeled herself to visit the prisoner, and see what progress Zevran had made.

They did not arise very early the next morning. Astrid had taken over guarding the prisoner from Zevran, and had slept on a thin pallet outside the door. They had much to do today, and Bronwyn decided that heavy chains and a stout lock, and instructions to Mistress Rannelly to permit no one into the upper floors would be adequate to keep Erlina confined. Bronwyn suggested to Erlina that she wring her memory for every drop of useful or interesting

information before Bronwyn returned.

A hearty breakfast in the Wardens' Hall was followed by Bronwyn paying everyone. Zevran was surprised to be paid as well, and immensely pleased at the amount. While everyone else made plans for their outing, Bronwyn took Jowan with her to call on the Queen.

Anora had had a fairly good night. While obviously distressed at the betrayal of her husband and her personal servant, she was physically better to a degree that gave her some comfort.

"We have a lengthy confession, with quite a bit of detail," Bronwyn reported, showing her Zevran's roll of parchment. "We will talk to her again this afternoon, and see if she recalls anything else of use."

The Queen really was looking much, much better today. Jowan hovered over his patient, studying her for any sign of weakness. She, however, was determined to be strong, and read the sordid tale quickly. The degree of guilt of the Kendells was unclear in all this, but she would know now to watch them carefully. Arl Eamon had been deeply implicated, as was his wife. His brother, Teagan, was evidently innocent. That was a relief. Having one openly rebellious arl in Amaranthine, and another possibly plotting against her in Denerim was quite bad enough.

Marjolaine had been the King's contact with Orlais. Erlina knew of no others, though of course that did not mean there were not any. However, it would be some time

before the Empress knew that Marjolaine was out of the picture. That gave them some room to maneuver.

"Do I want to know how you obtained this?" Anora asked.

"I am not a torturer, Majesty," Bronwyn told her frankly. "I simply described to her the legal penalty for poisoning the monarch. I promised her, if she cooperated, a dose of sleeping potion instead."

Anora sighed. She had been fond of Erlina, who had made her life so very elegant and comfortable; who had done her hair so well, and sewn so beautifully. It had been the easiest thing in the world to tell the staff that she had turned her off for attempted theft. It would not be so easy to replace her skills. And it hurt. Not like Cailan's betrayal, of course, but still it *hurt*. Erlina had been a pleasant part of her life, and now Anora knew that Erlina had cared nothing for her, and had been watching her die with no more emotion than a butcher feels in slaughtering a spring lamb. She had been foolish to trust an Orlesian. Father was right about them, and she had been wrong to tease and taunt him in her servant's presence.

She felt so much better: almost like herself. Jowan was so sympathetic, and his spells had done her a world of good. She would suggest he see her *twice* a day. There was such a lot of work to be done, and she needed all the strength she could muster...

"Join me for dinner tonight, Warden-Commander," she said, quite graciously. Bronwyn had proven herself a true

friend and loyal subject. "We have much to discuss. As to Erlina, whether or not she has anything more to say this afternoon, I want an end to her by sunset, and I want never to hear her name again."

Bronwyn and her companions walked briskly to the Market District on the other side of the river. People stopped and stared at the Wardens, whispering and occasionally offering praise and thanks. Scout pretended to be unimpressed, but his trot was unusually dignified. It was perfectly normal for lesser folk to admire his human.

It had rained overnight, and some of the nastier reek had been washed away. Zevran smirked to himself. Rain or not, Ferelden still smelled like wet dog, and the massive and otherwise splendid Scout was not helping.

But there were still things worth seeing, and much of his party had never visited a city – or at least a human city. Even Astrid was craning her neck, looking about her in interest. The long walk up Gate Street to the Market led past some handsome noble houses, Bronwyn was kind enough to point them out.

"That place belongs to Bann Fandarel. He collects works of art and historical treasures. It's quite nice inside... The Arl of Redcliffe's city estate is in a corner of the Market District. Arl Eamon tore down the old house and completely rebuilt it. I heard it cost a fortune..."

To Astrid's eye, it was all very sprawling, and the houses

of the lesser folk were flimsily constructed of wood. She had read of the danger of fire to surfacers, and now she could see it for herself. They must be mad to use wood, cheap though it might be. Wood should only be used for bows and fine furniture. To slap it together and call it a dwelling was simply bizarre. Bronwyn had mentioned that her own family's house here in Denerim was of stone, which seemed infinitely more sensible. Of course, they were nobles.

Jowan looked uncomfortable and awed. Tara grinned at him. She had never seen a city before her first visit, and she could imagine what he was feeling. Today they had no need to hide who they were, and it was so much more fun. And she *would* see the Alienage, this time.

This place stinks, Danith thought. *How can these people endure the reek? It is all so dirty: so dirty and squalid.* The homes of the common folk, she decided, were very shabby and ugly. On the other hand, not everything here was bad. The Palace might be hard and stony, but it was kept surprisingly clean. The room she shared with Tara in the Wardens' Compound had a large window with a bit of colored glass at the top, and it opened. One could lean out and see much of the city. From above and far away, it looked much, much better.

"Danith!" Tara murmured, pink with excitement. "You're coming with me to the Alienage, aren't you?"

The Dalish girl sighed. "Yes. I gave you my word, did I not? I shall see how my city cousins live with clear eyes,

so I can tell my clan someday my own impressions."

"You're coming with us, aren't you, Zevran?"

Zevran chuckled. "If I must. No, indeed, I should be honored to escort two such lovely examples of elven womanhood. I only hope you are not too disappointed."

"I do not think I shall be... *disappointed*," Danith remarked. She hoped, for Tara's sake, that the rumors she had heard were exaggerated.

Tara said, "I won't be disappointed. I am just going to see it, and then I'll know where I came from. If it's awful, then I can be glad I'm a Grey Warden and live in our lovely Compound, and eat Mistress Rannelly's delicious food. You admitted it was good, Danith!"

"The food is heavy," Danith shrugged, "but it is well-prepared and not over-salted. The shemlen woman is earnest in her desire to perform her duty."

Tara winked at Zevran. "I saw her eat nearly an entire loaf of apple bread at breakfast," she whispered loudly.

"The bread was good, and made wholesome by the addition of the fruit," Danith said, unruffled. "And the butter was fresh. It was an adequate meal."

Ahead, the noise grew louder, and the scene opened, as they emerged at the mouth of Gate Street in the broad and cobbled Market. Buildings large and small surrounded the irregular space. Shop signs distracted and confused the eye. People were everywhere, as noisy as the army at Ostagar, but here they were all ages. Danith particularly liked to

see the little ones running and playing. Their sweet, high voices gave a touch of music to the human cacophony. A wave of homesickness struck her, thinking of the children of her clan, and how she had loved watching over them.

In the center of the Market was a large and colorful circular awning, shading some of the vendors.

"That large building is the Chantry," Bronwyn said, pointing to it. "I expect that you would rather browse in the Market than go there. I do not think I shall be long. I'll meet you under the awning."

Astrid was actually rather curious about the Chantry, but not so curious that she would not prefer to visit the shops. She had coin to spend, and there were all sorts of little luxuries that would improve her life.

Zevran had decided to wear a hooded cloak, and pulled up the hood at this point, just in case some of his old Crow friends were watching. The gold in his purse seemed deliciously heavy, and it was calling on him to spend it...

Of course all the merchants thought Jowan was in charge. He was tall, he was human, and he was male. They were very polite to Astrid, as a dwarf and a Warden. They did not seem to know quite to make of the elves, but they did not refuse to sell to them. It was baffling to Jowan, who had never in his life been in charge of anything, but Astrid pushed him along in front.

"Look calm," she whispered. "Look calm and haughty, and no one will question your right to be here."

He glanced down at her broad and comely face, and tried to imitate her expression; though he was unsure that anyone else could manage calm and haughty as well as a dwarven princess.

Zevran suggested they make a circuit of the vendors first, to get an idea of what was there before they started throwing gold around. It was not the flowery metropolis of Antiva, but there was much to see here: jewelry and scented oils, fine woodcraft and wax candles, musical instruments and richly dyed cloth. Pretty young girls cried their wares as they walked through the market, selling bunches of sweet herbs or berry tarts for a few coppers. Obviously, everyone had to have a tart. Or three.

Quite abruptly, Astrid's face changed, and she gasped. Before Jowan could ask her what was wrong, she was dashing away, crying, "*Gorim!*"

"I think she knows that dwarf," Jowan told the others. "She ran off to talk to him."

"Should we join her?" Tara wondered.

"Why don't we give them a moment together first?" counseled Zevran. "if she wishes to introduce us, she will let us know."

After only a few minutes, Astrid walked back to her companions. They were looking at her, and it was important not to let herself down.

She hoped her face did not betray her. She hoped no

one could see just how bitterly disappointed and hurt she was. For all his words at parting, Gorim's life had gone on without her quite well. Exiled for his friendship for her, yes; but now comfortably established on the surface. Married. A child already on the way. She should be glad for him – and she was, she really was – but their reunion had certainly not played out the way it had in her dreams.

"He's a good friend of yours from Orzammar?" Jowan asked.

Astrid fixed a cheerful expression on her face, searching out every little muscle around her eyes and mouth. "He was my Second. He was exiled when I was sent to the Deep Roads. It was so pleasant to see him again, and to see him doing well."

He had been beneath her then, she recalled, pulling her shoulders back proudly. He was still beneath her. He had been a simple warrior, and she a king's daughter. Now, he was a shopkeeper's son-in-law, and she was a Grey Warden. Unconsciously, she smoothed her tabard, fingertips lingering on the griffons blazoned there.

She added carelessly, "Perhaps I shall buy something from him later." She pointed away from them and said, "Look! There's Bronwyn!"

Relieved to see all her people in one piece and not in trouble of any kind, Bronwyn waved back at Astrid.

Her notes were tucked away. They might or might not be useful someday, but she was clear in her own mind

that Adaia – once Melian Tabris – had been the victim of a criminal abuse of noble privilege. Vaughan might be immune from legal remedies, but Adaia had been cruelly wronged. Mother Boann had signed the written statement without any hesitation. She, of course, was concerned for elvish souls; and was distressed that she had not been asked back into the Alienage since the day of the “unfortunate affair.” She feared that the elves, out of foolish secrecy, were reverting to some primitive, pagan marriage rite.

Further inquiries revealed that no one had seen or heard from Brother Genetivi since he had left Denerim so many months before. His house was locked, and no one answered the door. “But,” as one elderly sister told Bronwyn, “the Maker sees all, and will gather the good brother to him, if that is his plan for him. We must trust in the Maker’s wisdom.”

Bronwyn nodded, not agreeing at all, but too sensible to argue. So Brother Genetivi had vanished into the blue. She would go over the notes and map tonight. It seemed a mad plan to look for a mythical ancient relic, but it was possible that someone would be called on to do it, in order to save Ferelden’s Queen.

She gave her people a smile and gestured at a sign nearby. “Let us visit Wade, Master Armorer of Denerim.”

Not only Wade, but his partner Herren recognized her armor the moment she entered the shop, even covered as it was with a Grey Warden tabard.

“I knew it! I knew it!” Wade dithered. “The Girl Warden! I suspected it from the first. Didn’t I say so, Herren?”

“I suspected it before you did,” Herren shot back. “She wouldn’t remove that tacky helmet, so it was obvious that she was concealing her identity. I must say what she’s wearing now is an improvement, though a bit,” he paused delicately, “old-fashioned.” The salesman turned to Bronwyn and asked pleasantly, “You were on a secret mission, I assume.”

Her friends burst out laughing. Zevran slapped Jowan on the back, shaking his head. Even Danith smirked. Bronwyn smiled graciously. “I was indeed, and I would appreciate your continued discretion. My friend Tara here needs some light armor, and I would like to discuss the possibility of some custom weapons.”

“Customized for what?” Herren asked warily. Wade bounced on the balls of his feet, hoping for something really interesting at last.

“For dragonslaying,” Bronwyn said briskly, secretly amused at their expressions. “We killed a dragon down by Ostagar, but it was a messy, inefficient business. We’re trying to find out more about how the old Nevarran dragonhunters worked, but until then we need to move beyond swords and daggers. I was thinking of very sharp spears that would pierce the hide more effectively. I climbed up on the creature’s back to get at the brain, but I nearly slipped off. Perhaps spiked boots or some sort of hooks to anchor oneself with? We might need some unusual materials...”

Herren appeared horrified at the time and work that would distract Wade from his usual tasks. Wade was looking ecstatic.

"Unusual materials! Custom weapons! We can test them on my stock of dragonbone! This is wonderful! Tell me, do you have any diamonds?"

"Diamonds?" Bronwyn faltered. How much was this going to cost? Wade wanted to be paid in *diamonds*?

"For the tips, of course!" Wade raved on joyously. "Diamond-tipped lances might be just the thing... I suppose sapphires or rubies would do... Oh, at last something worthy of my talents..."

Bronwyn managed to calm Wade a little, and get him back to the issue of armor for Tara *now*. Armor in elven sizes was not produced in great quantity, but in his storeroom, he did have a striking gambeson of studded russet leather that, with some alterations, would fit a small and slender elf woman. It was expensive, of course, and Bronwyn was relieved that Tara already had sturdy boots and gloves, purchased at Ostagar. With visions of amazing, never-before-seen weapons dancing in his imagination, Wade promised to have Tara's armor ready by the following afternoon.

"We'll talk more," Bronwyn told the armorer. "I'd like to see some sketches, perhaps, and talk it over. The Wardens, alas, do not have an unlimited treasury."

Herren's face fell a bit, but Wade was too excited to care about mere coin. As they left the shop, he was muttering

about "lyrium-silverite alloys."

"Next, we're going to The Wonders of Thedas," Bronwyn told them. "I want to see what can be done about disguising a mage's staff."

So they walked to the other side of the Market, and turned down a narrow street leading off it. Tara pointed out the Gnawed Noble Tavern to Danith and Astrid.

"It's very elegant," she informed them. "And they make baked apples to die for!" She was bubbling with delight, eager to find out what Wonders Thedas had for her.

Bronwyn had not been in the shop since she was twelve years old, and was relieved to see that it was as large as she remembered: a huge, dim interior, filled with books and rarities and whimsical objects. It had an odd, not unpleasant smell that reminded her of the Circle of Magi.

Scout sniffed the air. He knew what that odor meant. It could be good or bad, depending on the person.

"It's the lyrium," Jowan murmured, sniffing the air, too. He looked at the counter across the room and flinched. The forehead of the man on duty there was glittering with a distinctive lyrium brand. He was one of the Tranquil. Jowan glanced over at Tara, who caught his eye, understanding.

This was the fate that Jowan had feared above all: this was what he had turned to Blood Magic to escape. To be forcibly cut off from the Fade, to be stripped of feeling and independent will, to be made a mere puppet of the Chantry — it was a fate worse than death. It was also a fate



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very profitable for the Chantry, who used the Tranquil for unpaid labor, crafting precious items for sale. Any money spent here would go directly into the Chantry's coffers. Some Circle apprentices did indeed choose to be made Tranquil: terrified by the unknown terrors of the Harrowing. More were forcibly made Tranquil: unharrowed mages who were deemed to be "trouble" for one reason or another. Tara and Anders had passed their Harrowing, and so were free of this one fear, at least.

"Welcome to the Wonders of Thedas..." said the proprietor in a smooth monotone. Bronwyn allowed her people to browse, while she quizzed the former mage about the possibility of making a staff not appear to be a staff.

"It would be easy to accomplish," the Tranquil informed her calmly. "The Chantry, however, prefers that mages be distinguishable by large and ornate staffs."

"Could you make a sword work as a staff?" Bronwyn pressed. "Or a dagger? Could a mage cast with it instead of something made of wood?"

"Wood is hardly the only substance to be used for a mage's staff," the Tranquil pointed out serenely. "A staff can be made of wood, metal or bone. It needs to be inscribed with the appropriate runes, but a sword-shaped staff is not inconceivable. I have heard of actual swords that could be used for limited casting. However, no one in our workshop is skilled in weapon-crafting."

Jowan was trying not to look at the Tranquil. He did not



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know the man. From his age, Jowan guessed he must have become Tranquil at least ten years ago. Still, simply knowing what he had been, and what he was now made Jowan's flesh crawl. He muttered, "And I know nothing of weapons-using. I'd rather have a sword-shaped staff than a real sword, Bronwyn. I wouldn't know what to do with a sword."

"And I wouldn't want to try to carry a shield around," agreed Tara. "I'd do better defending myself with magic. A sword-shaped staff! That's... sort of funny when you think about it, but I don't know why it wouldn't work. A staff is simply a focus, after all. Mainly, you have to believe in it."

"I like the idea, thought," Jowan said slowly. "If I had a scabbard, I wouldn't have to carry my staff in my hand all the time. It would feel... powerful... to draw a sword and cast with it. Even a fake sword."

Zevran nodded, "And you could put it all in a harness with a real dagger. My friends, I suggest that you have a non-magical weapon with you as well. Something that would not set off certain... alarms, shall we say? A standard double-harness, shall we say, with a dagger and your 'sword-shaped staff'."

Prices and specifications, based on the mages' preferred Schools of Magic, were then discussed. Bronwyn groaned inwardly, shuddering at the expense. It was for the best, and she should really order a staff for Anders and Morrigan as well...

Luckily, Tara could give the Tranquil very specific information about the type of staff that each of the absent mages

would find useful. The Tranquil required no leisure, and the staffs would be ready the following day. Bronwyn herself needed some leisure rather desperately after hearing the total cost, and decided to visit the Gnawed Noble for a drink.

"Zevran, you're with me," she said. "Tara, take the other Wardens to the cache. Bring back all of Brother Genetivi's notes, along with whatever suits your fancy there."

Tara felt deliciously important, leading the other junior Wardens to the cache, showing them the tricky way in, then displaying their hoard of emergency supplies.

"A lot of these books are copies of the ones in the study," Jowan said, closing one, and moving on the crates of clothing. Sometimes he missed robes, but Bronwyn insisted that he stay in the light armor she had bought for him. If he was going to be visiting the Queen regularly, however, he would need something less martial. There was always his Grey Warden tabard, but Mistress Rannelly had overheard, and assured the Commander that there were all sorts of fine garments for men in the storage rooms. She would find a "proper" doublet for Warden Jowan to wear when he visited the Queen. Jowan sighed, thinking about it. His life had certainly changed.

"Some of the victuals need to be replaced," Astrid said, wrinkling her nose. "When time permits, this place should be thoroughly cleaned and inventoried." If one was going to be a Grey Warden, one should do it thoroughly.

Danith had found some Dalish arrows. There was dust on the quiver, but it was from a Northern clan. It was comforting to know that she was not the first Dalish Warden. She slung the quiver over her shoulder and tightened the strap.

It was rather shocking for a human lady to sit down with an elf for a drink in the Gnawed Noble Tavern. If the lady had been anything less than a Cousland and the Warden-Commander of Ferelden, it would have been too scandalous to be permitted.

Edwina, the landlady, being told by a serving maid of the odd behavior by the tall lady with the winged helmet and the griffon tabard, took a look, understood immediately who the lady was, and said, "That's the Girl Warden, that is: Lady Bronwyn Cousland herself. Great nobles will have their little eccentricities, Dilys. Address her ladyship as "Warden-Commander" and give her what she wants. If she wants to stand a drink for an elf, that's her business. I've heard that some elves have been Grey Wardens, so it's likely that fellow with her is one of them. That's all right, I suppose. They're heroes, after all."

Dilys brought the drinks as instructed. It seemed odd to be serving an elf, but he was a handsome fellow, to be sure, and his armor was high-class. For an elf to be strutting about town in armor meant he had to have permission, so she smiled back when he smiled at her. He really was very handsome.

More elves came in after a bit, and one of them was a *mage*: a real mage with a *staff*. She was wearing one the Grey Warden tabards, too. There was a nice-looking human warrior and a dwarf in good armor, so that made the group a *little* more respectable. There weren't a lot of customers so early in the day, and no one was complaining about the elves, so Edwina gave strict orders to offer the Girl Warden and her party every courtesy, short of drinks on the house.

Oblivious to the stir she had created, Bronwyn went over their plans for the rest of the day.

"Mistress Rannelly will serve a midday meal for us at the Hall, so I suppose we should go there soon. Buy what you have a fancy for, and then let's head back to the Compound. This afternoon, I must go pay that visit to my cousins. Arl Bryland is well-disposed to the Wardens, and I want him to remain so."

"He's a nice man," Tara agreed. "He speaks to me nicely, without smirking in *that* way."

"You will speak to his wife... the... Arlessa? Is that the correct title?" asked Astrid.

"Cousin Leonas is a widower," Bronwyn told them. "His wife died in childbirth with his second son, Lothar. Lothar must be — let me see — ten years old now! Corbus is a little older, maybe twelve or thirteen. The only one of those children I know well is my cousin Habren. She's a year younger than I, and when we were children we visited

back in forth in an effort to make us become friendly."

"Your unenthusiastic tone suggests that it was not a success," Astrid remarked.

"I have to be polite to Habren," Bronwyn said, obliquely answering Astrid. "She is my cousin's eldest child, and she is..." she blew out a breath..."betrothed to Bann Vaughan, and thus will very likely someday be Arlessa of Denerim."

Danith looked utterly repulsed. "Should you not warn your kinswoman about that vile man?" she asked Bronwyn.

Tara seconded her. "He might hurt her!"

"I don't know..." Bronwyn hesitated. She was unsure how much she should tell them about her relatives. It would hardly be tactful to explain that Vaughan would very likely treat the noble daughter of a powerful father entirely differently than he treated other women — especially elves. Even less did she want to admit that Vaughan's cruelty to others would probably not be in the least offensive to Habren. She said, "...Habren dislikes me, and I have no influence with her. If I told her one thing, she would do another to spite me. The person I could speak to would be her aunt Werberga, Arl Leonas' older sister. She raised Habren, and is very fond of her."

Her companions nodded sagely at that, even Danith. Bronwyn changed the subject. "While I am visiting Bryland House, I know that Tara wants to go to the Alienage. Do I understand that Danith and Zevran are going with you?"

"Yes! I'm so excited!"

"Very well. Please return to the Compound before sunset. I will be back long before that, for we must conclude things with the traitor. Jowan, I'd like you to seek out the Royal Library and start researching the Nevarrans. Anything you can find out about the old dragon hunters would help. We need to visit the Queen late in the afternoon, both to report and for her healing. I'm sorry to do this to you, Astrid, but I would like you to keep an eye on the prisoner while the rest of us are out visiting."

Astrid shrugged. "I shall take a book with me. I only ask..." she smiled slowly. "That you take me with you when you visit the Queen this afternoon. I wish to see her with my own eyes."

"Of course. We'll report and I'll present you. Jowan will do his spells. I'll be dining with the Queen tonight, so I'll be sure to tell Mistress Rannelly not to wait supper for me."

Zevran considered the matter. "Do not be too hasty with little Erlina. I will speak to her when I return, and see if there are not some last gems of intelligence to be coaxed from her."

It had to be done, so Bronwyn did it. In the privacy of her room at the Compound, she changed into her grey velvet gown, smoothed her hair, and set off on foot for Bryland House with Scout at her side. It was not far from the Palace – on the same side of the river, luckily, and she need not fear soiling her only finery.

She wondered how she could possibly care about looking

well for that irritating old cow Werberga, or for horrible, horrible Habren. Scout paced beside her, and she had daggers concealed in her boots. She was more than sufficiently armed for any threat likely to befall her at Cousin Leonas' house.

She gave her name at the door, which opened for her instantly. The upper servant showing her to the ladies' sitting room looked askance at Scout, and was evidently within an inch of telling Bronwyn that he would have to stay outside. Then he caught her eye, and looked away.

"My dear Bronwyn!" exclaimed Lady Werberga, coming forward to meet her, hands outstretched. Though fulsome and rather insincere, she was at least more polite than Habren, who did not bother to rise to greet a guest.

"I'd get up," said the young lady, with an impudent titter, "but you can see I'm busy."

In her lap was a mabari puppy. It was a handsome little fellow, perhaps a month old. It was squirming and crying, trying to escape Habren's clutches.

Scout lowered his head and growled softly. "He doesn't look very happy," Bronwyn said. Was Habren trying deliberately to provoke her?

"I'm imprinting on him," Habren declared. "It takes time. This is definitely the right one. I have a *feeling* about him."

"Habren is so fond of animals. Won't you be seated, Bronwyn dear?" Werberga asked. "We've heard so much about you. Such heroics! Your dear mother and father would be so proud."

Bronwyn forced herself to smile, hating Werberga for

bringing up her parents. She did not want to discuss them in the presence of Habren.

"Cousin Leonas asked me to bring all of you letters," Bronwyn said, forcing her voice to its most mellow tones. Was Habren going to strangle that puppy in front of her? If she did, Bronwyn had a dagger in her boot with Habren's name on it. She pulled out the folded and sealed parchments. "For you, Cousin Werberga," she said, handing the older woman her letter. "And for Habren..."

"Put it on the table. How nice of you to run errands for people. Didn't Father send any coin?" she asked, in a peevish whine. "I need some." The breeder had refused to sell her any more puppies until she paid something down on her account. This one had *better* imprint, and soon, if he knew what was good for him.

"He sent his best love, and these letters. I have letters for Corbus and Lothar as well. May I see them?"

Werberga hated to have the boys in the sitting room. They made such a noise... Still, Leonas had wished it...

"Of course, my dear." She summoned a servant. "Fetch Lords Corbus and Lothar to me at once. Their cousin, the Girl – I mean – the Grey Warden, is here." She gave a little embarrassed laugh. "Such an odd nickname, Bronwyn. It seems almost disrespectful."

"I'm used to it, now," Bronwyn smiled.

"You must be," Habren said carelessly. "It's clear you've been doing nothing but fighting. Is that a *scar* on your

face, or did you forget to wash today?"

"Habren!" her aunt reproved her. She said to Bronwyn, "I hardly noticed it, my dear. I have a very good formula for face cream. You see how it has taken my wrinkles quite away. I'm sure it would help."

Habren smirked at her. Bronwyn smiled back mildly, imagining Habren in the Deep Roads.

"Yes, Habren," she said sweetly. "It's a scar. I got it fighting darkspawn. And my eyes are green because of darkspawn poison. There now, that takes care of me. And what about you? Are you happy with your betrothal?"

Lady Werberga leaned forward, triumphant. "Bann Vaughan," she confided, "has given my dear Habren a diamond!"

Habren kept a firm grip on the poor puppy, while waving her left hand in Bronwyn's direction. On it was a massive, sparkling boulder.

"See my ring?" Habren demanded. "Vaughan gave it to me before he left for Ostagar. I heard that Grey Wardens were practically like *priests* and could never marry. I am so sorry for you."

"It is certainly true," Bronwyn said pleasantly, "that Grey Wardens are generally too busy in the middle of a Blight to plan a large wedding. I do hope Bann Vaughan's military obligations do not interfere with yours."

Habren's eyes glittered, but before she could say what was on her mind, the door opened and Arl Bryland's two sons bounded in, with their tutor bringing up the rear.

They were nice-looking lads, even though they resembled their sister with their dark hair and grey eyes.

"Bronwyn, here are Corbus and Lothar," their aunt introduced them. As an afterthought, she added, "and their tutor, Master Cletus. "My dear boys, meet your cousin, the Warden-Commander of Ferelden!"

Lothar narrowed his eyes. "If you're the Girl Warden, where's your sword?" The tutor winced.

His brother elbowed him. "Don't be rude. Where is your sword?" he asked Bronwyn himself. "Don't Girl Wardens fight?"

"Quite often," Bronwyn admitted, "but I come to you in peace, hence the gown. My armor and weapons are back at the Warden Compound. Except for the daggers in my boots, of course."

The boys were entranced. "No way do you have daggers in your boots!" Corbus challenged her.

"Yes, way," Bronwyn contradicted him, and drew them at once, the boys' everlasting delight. She twirled them briefly, not as expertly as Zevran could, but well enough for the boys' edification. She then resheathed them emphatically, grinning at them.

"Wicked!" they breathed.

She pulled out the boys' letters. "Your father sent these to you, along with his love," she told them seriously. "He misses you very much, and talks about you all the time. He's a very brave man, and thinking about how you're learning and growing into fine young men yourselves

helps him do his duty in the war."

Habren sulked. Bronwyn had not said anything nice about Father missing her; and he had not sent more coin, or any jewels either. He favored the boys *scandalously*: anybody could see it.

Corbus said, "I wish I could be with him. I'm nearly old enough to squire for him. I've heard there are boys at Ostagar younger than me!"

"And me!" Lothar agreed stoutly.

There were, of course, but Bronwyn thought it was a horrible thing to exploit children in such a way. Very few of them were officially soldiers, but they were in the baggage train and in the bomb workshop, or running errands. They were often in considerable danger. Most were orphans, and very poor, and were glad to be earning their bread. There was certainly no reason for the sons of the Arl of South Reach to emulate them.

"You'll be old enough in few years," Bronwyn said calmly, "and meanwhile you need to prepare yourselves for leadership. Study your lessons and get your exercise. Your time will come soon enough. You never know what you'll need to know. I hated learning accounts, but it was very useful when I had to take charge of the Grey Wardens and make sure I could keep my warriors supplied and paid!"

"I suppose," Corbus granted dolefully. "Did your tutor make you learn *Orlesian*?"

She ruffled his hair, laughing. "Of course he did!"

"Are you going to stay for dinner?" asked Lothar. His aunt turned red.

"Of course I meant to ask you, my dear. It was right on the tip of my tongue. Would you do us the honor of dining with us tonight?"

"Thank you so much," Bronwyn purred, "but I am dining with the Queen." A mischievous thought struck her, seeing the boys' disappointment. "Perhaps you would care to take your midday meal with me at the Wardens' Compound tomorrow? I fear I shall not be in Denerim any longer than that."

Habren sneered, "I am quite sure that no matter how long you are in Denerim, I have a prior engagement."

"We don't!" Corbus beamed. "Might we go, Aunt? Seeing the Grey Wardens is like having a lesson... sort of."

"Yes," Lothar said loyally. "Like an *ancient* history lesson. Master Cletus, isn't visiting Grey Wardens like a lesson?"

"I suppose..." ventured the scholar.

"Of course you may go," Werberga said generously, glad to get the boys out of the house. "But be back by mid-afternoon, mind."

There was much cheering and capering about. Habren looked away in disgust, so annoyed that her long and manicured nails dug into the puppy's skin. The poor thing squealed in pain. Instantly, Scout charged at Habren, baying like a Hound of Hell.

The shocked young woman cringed away. Taking advantage of an enemy's weakness, Scout snatched up the puppy

by the scruff of the neck, and ran him over to Corbus, dropping him in the delighted boy's hands. The relieved puppy, glad of the change, wagged his tail nearly off.

"How lovely!" Bronwyn exclaimed. "I believe that Corbus has imprinted on the puppy. It is so kind of you, Habren, to give Corbus such a generous gift. There is no friend so true as a mabari! What do you think you shall name him, Corbus?"

"He's mine, and his name is Fluff!" Habren leaped to her feet, eyes blazing. Scout growled at her, and she sat down hastily. "And take your vicious monster away from me!"

"Scout, sit!" Bronwyn commanded, amused that Scout obeyed immediately, sitting in front of Habren and watching her, not blinking, just exactly as he watched poisonous snakes. Werberga smiled weakly.

Corbus flopped onto a settee, admiring the happy puppy, allowing his younger brother to tentatively scratch a small ear. "His name is Killer. That's a good name for a mabari, isn't it?"

Scout barked: a cheerful agreement. A very suitable name for a true warrior. Killer squeaked adorably.

"Do bring Killer with you tomorrow," Bronwyn advised. "You need to keep him with you as much as possible to help the imprinting along. The little fellow is too small to walk that far, so put him in a basket." She turned to Habren, her smile menacing. "Your father will be so happy to hear that Corbus has imprinted on a mabari. I shall certainly tell him all about it. If anything were to happen to little Killer, I think he'd be very displeased."

CHAPTER 13



"NO ONE HARMS ME WITH IMPUNITY"

RESOUNDING CRASH

SHOOK VIGIL'S KEEP TO ITS ANCIENT FOUNDATIONS. Maids shrieked, dropping trays and pitchers, and huddled together under tables, trembling. With daybreak, the bombardment had started afresh.

The two sturdy young footmen kept on walking upstairs, though the lithe and slender one raised his brows expressively at his big and burly friend. The young teyrn must be genuinely enraged to seek out and harness such weapons. Of course, the Arl had killed Teyrn Cousland's wife and child. His parents, too, if the young men understood the story aright. If this went on, everyone in this Maker-forsaken fortress would die.

In fact, calling the two louts "footmen" was a bit of an exaggeration, though that was how they described themselves to impressionable peasant girls who were awed by anyone grand enough to live in the Keep. They had been taken on, after much begging and flattery, as kitchen guttingmen, the lowest of the low, needed after the last of the

elves had mysteriously departed. They had proved skilled at the job. The head cook had seen with his own eyes how deftly they wielded their knives and cleavers, and even talked of apprenticing them.

That mattered little now. It was only a matter of time before Teyrn Cousland battered his way into the Inner Keep. There would be a last-ditch stand, and anyone with the least bit of sense knew how that would go.

By all the laws of war, handed down for thousands of years, the Vigil would be sacked. That was what happened if a town or castle declared besieged held out to the last. The victors had the right to rape, kill, and plunder without let or hindrance.

"You know, Luke," said the guttingman Galen to his friend, "Very likely, if the old Arl has his way, we'll all be dead by the day after tomorrow."

Luke only shrugged. He was not a talker.

Not even the Arl's daughter — possibly not even the priests — would be spared, though probably the young lady would be kept fresh for the Teyrn's personal attentions. That was the way it was, and the two young men on their way upstairs saw no reason to complain. The world was what it was.

Because they were not so completely unmanned as the other servants, Cook had allowed them to take the breakfast trays up to the Arl and his family, and given them clean smocks to wear. Ordinarily they would have



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not have been permitted out of the kitchens, but the Arl and his family must have their breakfast, looming apocalypse or no. There was no seneschal to prevent such a lapse of decorum, since old Varel had been demoted to clerk for arguing with the Arl about something or other. Of course Varel was not in the office, but was in his armor and taking his watch on the battlement, along with every other trained warrior.

So up the guttingmen walked, their boots tramping in unison, a hard rhythm like the irresistible footsteps of Fate. They paused briefly in front of the solar door, to put everything in order, and then Luke shouldered his way in. Servants only knocked at the Arl's study and at bedchamber doors.

"Breakfast," Galen announced, adding almost insolently, "my lords and lady."

The old man looked at them only to sneer. The heir, Thomas, was slumped at the table, a tall silver cup of ale already empty before him. He peered up bleakly at the servants and gestured vaguely at them to put the food on the table. Useless sot, Luke had called him once; but Galen had held that there was nothing wrong with him that a spot of hard work wouldn't cure.

The young lady was already sitting at her place, silent and sad, with red eyes. Galen looked at Luke, and gave a deep expressive sigh. It was a shame what innocent young ladies had to suffer on account of no-good fathers. Luke just stared at her. He thought she was a very nice young



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lady, and hoped she would eat her breakfast without a fuss. It was the best thing for her.

He loomed over her, immense and beefy. She looked up at him, a question in her mild grey eyes.

"Eat your porridge, my lady," he rumbled softly. "It'll do you good."

She gave him a wavering, uncertain smile, and dipped her spoon into the bowl. Being bossed by well-meaning, simple servants reminded her of happier times.

"Bit of spiced cider for your lordship," Galen whispered to Thomas, giving him a sly wink. Thomas snorted, and was pleased at how the man had spiked the cider with Antivan brandy. He should slip the fellow some silver later.

Galen jerked his head at Luke, and they backed away, standing by the door like good, invisible servants. The old Arl flung himself down in his chair and began eating like he was angry with his porridge. Galen's opinion was that he was angry at nearly everything in the world most of the time.

In between fierce, quick, swallows, he was berating his son. "Do up your buckles, for Maker's sake, Thomas! Do you want the men to see you like that?"

The young man gulped down his cider and then obediently fastened his buckles. He muttered, "I don't see that it makes much difference."

"Pull yourself together, boy," sneered his father, still wolfing down his breakfast. "We're not dead yet. I have a plan..."

Luke felt sorry for the young lady, listening to her father



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going at her brother that way. He probably did it all the time.

Arl Howe lowered his voice, and hissed, "There's a tunnel out of the dungeons that only the Arls of Amaranthine know about. After breakfast, Delilah, I want you to put on some stout walking shoes and go to the dungeons as far as the crypt entrance. I'll get together my picked men. Thomas, you go with her, and no dallying for a drink! Then we'll make our way to Esmerelle..."

"Esmerelle," said the boy, looking disgusted.

His father snarled at him. "Bann Esmerelle to you! Our most faithful friend. She'll stand by us no matter what. The King will not permit his finest port city to be destroyed by Fergus Cousland's infernal machines."

Thomas grimaced. "Yes, Father." He grimaced again, like a man with a bellyache.

"Father," Delilah said softly. "I don't think..." She got to her feet slowly, steadying herself with one hand. "I feel so strange..." She swayed, and stumbled away from the table.

Thomas uttered a soft, guttural belch. Rendon, already exasperated at Delilah for her weakness, scowled at him. It was bad enough that Delilah looked like she was about to faint. Now was no time for Thomas' drunken tricks...

Abruptly, a red spray of vomit burst from the young man. He choked, jerking in violent spasms. Another burst of bloody vomit, and he toppled from the bench, voiding urine in his rigors.

"Oh, no..." Delilah gazed at her brother wild-eyed, and



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put out her hand to Rendon, feebly. "Help... oh, Father, I think... we are... poisoned..." She sank to her knees, her head drooping like a wilted flower, and then fell sideways, her arms outspread and limp.

Galen rolled his eyes at Luke. He must have put Quiet Death in the girl's porridge. *What a big softie.*

Howe took a breath to shout for help, when he was seized from behind by a pair of mighty arms. One held him up off the ground, and the other was across his throat, stifling his cries.

One of the servants who had brought the breakfast was grinning at him: the smaller one. He was pulling a dagger from his boot, while he walked up to Howe, careful not to unkindly step on the dying young woman on the floor.

"So, Dog Lord, here we are. You think there were no Antivan merchants in Highever, to carry home the story of your murdering ways? You think Signora Fortuny would let you get away with killing her daughter?" Galen smirked, Howe attempted to struggle, growing weaker, ever weaker. "It never occurred to you that the House of Fortuny would want *revenge*? The old lady's pretty angry about it, I can tell you. She never wanted to send her daughter off to Dog Land, but the girl was crazy about her big handsome barbarian. Signora Fortuny knew something terrible would happen, and it did. But you know what? You kill one of hers, and she'll kill two of yours!"

Luke grunted in Howe's ear. "That's the *Antivan* way!"



The dagger struck. Howe thrashed impotently. It was a cruel blow, but not an instantly fatal one. The assassins had their instructions.

Galen went on with the story. "So now that you're on the outs with your Dog King, our Queen gave Signora Fortuny permission to send in the Crows." Galen gave his dagger a twist. "Galliano and Lucian. At your service."

Howe bit back a scream. He would not give this scum the satisfaction of seeing him beg for mercy. Thomas was still jerking, but weakly; and Delilah was already still, so very still, so white...like a statue of Andraste...

"Signora Fortuny gave us a nice box for your heart. She wants to see it," Luke – Lucian – rumbled, his powerful grasp relentless.

Howe's vision was blurring, turning to grey. This was death! It was wrong, all wrong. He himself had a contract with the Crows to kill the Cousland spawn! Everyone had betrayed him... He had his plans, and Ferelden *needed* him. All he wanted was a chance to get to Loghain, and explain...

"But first," Galliano purred, "she instructed me to say these words to you: *'No one harms me with impunity,'* and then, of course," he laughed, "to make sure you saw your children die in front of you."

A tiny, red-hot flame of hope lingered to the last, before the grey dissolved to black.

They don't know about Nathaniel... Maker, don't let them know about Nathaniel... the Howes... must live...



Within the hour, a white flag of parley was flying from the shattered battlements of Vigil's Keep.

Fergus approached, and found himself facing Varel, Howe's seneschal. He frowned, wondering if this was some trick. He was not risking himself within bowshot to speak to an underling.

"Where is Howe?" he demanded brusquely.

"The Arl... is dead, my lord," Varel said heavily. "He and his children together. They appear to have been assassinated by the Crows, for that mark and a note were found by their bodies in the solar."

"Killed?" Fergus stared at the silver-haired man, shocked. "Delilah, too? Thomas?"

"I fear so, lord Teyrn," said Varel. "Howe was slaughtered gruesomely, but Lord Thomas and Lady Delilah appear to have been poisoned. We are searching the castle for suspects, but in all the confusion... At any rate, I am here to offer our submission. With the Arl dead, there is nothing left to fight for."

"Have your men lay down their arms at once," Fergus said stiffly. He felt oddly bereft. There would be no final battle. There would be no duel, no settling of accounts, no blood vengeance for his wrongs. Rendon Howe was already beyond his reach, and his fate was in the hands of the Maker.

"My lord," Varel said uncertainly, "we ask forgiveness and amnesty for the soldiers of Vigil's Keep, and that punishment for the deeds of the late Arl not be visited on his men."



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Fergus stared at him, his face hardening. "I shall use them as they deserve. I shall not give amnesty to men who killed my wife and son – who murdered my mother and my father. I want the names of every man who participated in the attack on Highever, not for collective punishment but for individual justice. Their stories will be heard. At the top of the list I want the names of the officers who led the attack."

"There will be resistance," Varel said quietly. "It may take some time."

"Then you'd better *sort it out*. The bombardment will resume in one hour." Fergus turned his back on the man and stalked back to his knights.

A watchful silence fell over the besiegers. Fergus took the break in activity for a quick meal, standing up by a trebuchet, munching bread and cheese. Something was going on in the fortress. There was movement and the occasional loud voice. Another silence and then from the courtyard, there were a group of voices raised in hot debate, growing louder and louder. A clash of metal against metal followed.

"A little civil war in there, my lord," Fergus' squire Seyton laughed.

"Serves them right," snarled one of his captains. "Let the swine kill each other off."

"They're afraid," Fergus said quietly. "They're afraid because they know what they'd do in my place. They know



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what they did at Highever, and that they have no right to expect anything else."

"My lord!" a soldier ran up. "A pack of the bastards broke out of the outer wall to the east. It's not a sortie. They're escaping. We brought down a few, but half a dozen are headed north, riding hard!"

"Naois! Fenwick! Take your men and ride them down!" Fergus bellowed. "If they're fleeing, they're the ones we want!"

The knights galloped off, hot on the trail. Not too long after, a runner presented himself before the teyrn.

"My lord, Ser Naois is after the fugitives. We examined the bodies of the fallen and took two wounded men captive. They identified one of the dead as Captain Dillon, one of Howe's most trusted officers. Another one of Howe's picked men, Captain Chase, is among the fugitives, and it is thought he is going to the town of Amaranthine, either to take ship or to join forces with Bann Esmerelle. The two prisoners have themselves admitted having been at Highever the night it fell, though they claim they were with the reserves."

"They're lying," Fergus growled. "If they had nothing to fear from me, they would have stayed in the Keep. Keep them close and we'll find out where they really were." He had always known this would be ugly: it had been ugly when Howe began it, and it would be just as ugly when a Cousland made an end of it. He felt calm, but it was bitter and forced, nasty as a slick of grease on a stagnant pond.



He waited, his anger turning sour. Delilah was dead. He had never really wanted that. He had pictured her kneeling for mercy before him, and then he would have said something sad and noble and spared her life. If Thomas has surrendered, he might well have done the same. Childhood companions were dead: poisoned by the Crows. He had contacted the Crows, yes; but surely that ship had not yet reached Antiva. And he had never suggested killing Delilah and Thomas. Who had arranged *this*?

The hour was gone, and there was still noise from the Keep. Fergus swore, and turned to the dwarven engineers.

"I've had enough of this. Send a missile into the face of the Inner Keep. If they can't make up their minds, I'll make them up for them."

Machinery creaked and squealed, as the engines were cranked into position. Fergus pushed a dwarf aside and muttered, "I want to send them the message myself."

The lever was filthy with oil and required a hard pull. It was satisfying to release his anger and disappointment and sorrow like this. With a tremendous *THUMP!* the rounded stone flew up and made a slow and graceful arc toward the Keep. The quarrel and fighting in the keep changed to screams of alarm. Stone met stone. A crash followed, and stone splinters exploded outwards. More screams rose from the courtyard. Fergus put up his hand, gesturing for the dwarves to hold the positions, and wait.

They did not have to wait for very long. The white flag



was up once more, and Varel, looking very much the worse for wear, limped into view above the gate.

"My lord Teyrn!" he called, sounding a little desperate. "We accede to your terms. We surrender unconditionally. Vigil's Keep... is yours." Thumps and thuds sounded from the gate, as the men inside unbarred it and swung it open.

"Summon my officers," Fergus quietly ordered his squire. When they were assembled, he addressed them briefly.

"Victory is ours, gentlemen, not so much by our own valor as by treachery within the Keep. My wife's family sent the Crows, and I regret that I have lost my opportunity to face the murderer of my family face to face. Seek out the assassins and bring them to me, and any of Howe's officers you find as well. As for the others, the defenders of Vigil's Keep have surrendered, and I will not have them harmed unnecessarily. Soldiers are to be questioned, and those who participated in the Highever massacre will face their just punishment. For the rest, kill only those who resist. Spare the servants and the unarmed, I command you. I despise cowards who think to prove themselves men by committing rape. Rapists will be hanged. I hold you responsible for the actions of your men. You have served bravely and unflinchingly, and there will be rewards for all. Now let us enter my fortress of Vigil's Keep, not to seek revenge, but to deliver the innocent, and to mete out justice for all."

Prudently, he sent in an advance guard. They picked their way through the bloody debris of the shattered court-



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yard, past the dead and the dying. Reports were coming in that there had been other defections. Some men had slipped through the west pastures; others had been seen running down along the river. They would catch those they could, but they must secure the Vigil, first of all.

The surviving defenders were rounded up. From smithy to storehouse to stable, the compound was combed for potential threats. A few warriors were hiding, but most of those they flushed out were frightened maidservants and trembling stableboys.

Varel stayed close at hand. Unless there was some proof that he was involved with the events at Highever, Fergus felt he would have little choice but to keep the man on as seneschal. Who else knew Vigil's Keep as he did? For that matter, who was better qualified to administer the arling for him? What was he going to do about Amaranthine, anyway? Would the King want to recall Nathaniel from the Free Marches? That was the logical solution, but at the moment Fergus could not think of a man he had less desire to see.

"Have the dungeons searched as well," he ordered another pair of officers. "They're large enough for quite a large force to hide in."

He remembered that the dungeons were accessed by a separate building in the courtyard that was outside the wall of the Inner Keep. It was an eccentric arrangement: one that Father had said dated to a time when the actual fortress was in a slightly different location. Nonetheless,



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a strong party was sent down to clean the dungeons out and to look for possible captives. Not that he held out much hope of finding Highever survivors, but he had to try. The search parties encountered scattered resistance from soldiers hiding in the dungeons, but found no prisoners, other than the usual local malefactors.

Then it was time to enter the Keep proper.

"Take me to Howe," he ordered.

Varel led the way. Fergus, his knights around him, followed through the damaged structure. He had commanded that there was to be no murder or rape of the unarmed, and his men seemed to be obeying, at least anywhere that he might see such offenses. There would be looting, of course. It was beyond any commander's power to prevent *that*.

The opulent Great Hall was not in terrible shape, other than some of the high clerestory windows being broken. Fergus and his men marched up through labyrinthine passages to the well-protected Lady's Tower. Vile as the murders had been, Fergus was bitterly relieved that he and his men would not have to fight their way through the castle, inch by bloody inch.

Some frightened Howe soldiers were posted outside the solar's open door. At the sight of Fergus and his men, they dropped to their knees.

"Lord Teyrn," they muttered.

"This is the place, my lord," Varel said quietly.

Fergus had been in this room many times: generally

when he and the other men had interrupted the ladies having tea. It had smelled of sweet herbs and sunlight; of silks and sugared cakes and expensive floral perfumes. He could almost see them now: his mother and Arlessa Mechtilde... Bronwyn and Delilah... Oriana...

Now it was a slaughterhouse, stinking of blood and voided bowels.

"Maker's Breath!" a knight swore, staring at Rendon Howe's mutilated body. "It looks like someone cut his heart out!"

"That's a shame," murmured another knight to a friend, pointing discreetly at Delilah's body. "I heard she was a nice girl. Shame to get mixed up in this."

"Almost looks like she's asleep," the friend replied.

Fergus hissed in disgust. Delilah did not look like she was sleeping to him. She was crumpled on the floor, pale face turned to the side. Her father's blood was everywhere, and had crept across the floor to her, where it was drying in a crust along the pure line of his daughter's profile. Delilah's lips were blue, and her eyes half open. Looking down at her, he felt nothing but grief.

"Some of her women must be alive," he said, "Have her delivered to them so they can prepare her decently for the pyre."

Thomas – silly, good-hearted, drunken Thomas – was almost unrecognizable. He had grown a beard since Fergus had last seen him, and his face was smeared with blood and vomit. Whatever the Crows had used on him, Fergus would wager it had been extremely painful.

And Howe – well, Fergus could not bring himself to care how much that man had suffered. His plots had ended in the death of his own children: a terrible judgment on him. Howe's eyes were open, staring at the empty air in agony and disbelief. Outrage was there too, frozen into his dead face. His murderers had seen that face, and had been unmoved. The terrible injury to his chest did indeed appear to be from someone cutting into him.

A piece of parchment was nailed to the breakfast table with a table knife. It bore the sign of the Crows and a clear message:

"Blood will have blood. Nemo me impune lacessit."

It was her, then. His bitch of a mother-in-law. The motto of the Fortunys, written in Old Antivan, was in effect *Sanguina Fortunys*' signature. She had stepped in, meddling and poisoning as she had back in Antiva. Fergus had nearly been poisoned by her himself. He had taken Oriana away from her, and the old woman had hated him for it, but not enough to refuse the trading concessions Father had paid for Oriana's marriage to Fergus. Oriana had always insisted that her mother loved her "in her own way." Fergus had thought that the Waking Sea had put enough distance between them for safety. Clearly, he had been wrong.

Well, I suppose this does indicate that the old woman felt something for Oriana. Love or pride, it's come to the same thing.

"I've seen enough," he said harshly. "Prepare their bodies for the pyre, and cover their faces. Retrieve the Arl's rings

and seals and anything that may give a clue to his doings. I wish to see where he kept his papers."

Out and down, down the stone steps. Women whispered and squeaked as they huddled away from him. Another door, this time opening to a blessedly quiet place.

"This is the study, my lord," Varel said. "I have impounded the Arl's papers for your examination."

"Thank you, Varel," Fergus murmured. He slumped tiredly into Rendon Howe's chair, staring at the pile of loose parchments and account books on the writing table. After a blank moment, he said, "I want to be alone now."

"As you wish, my lord," the seneschal acquiesced. "A meal and a bath are being prepared for you. And a room... the best guest room, not the family quarters... I thought —"

"Yes, yes, that's fine. I don't want to sleep in Rendon Howe's bloody bed! I *really* need to be *alone*, Varel," Fergus growled.

"My lord." The door closed, leaving Fergus to the anguish of memories. Perhaps somewhere in this study was the forged letter that had sentenced his family to death. A subtle, heartless trick by an Orlesian agent had killed his father and mother, his wife and his child, and all the loyal retainers of Highever. Marjolaine was still killing: today she had killed Rendon Howe and Delilah and Thomas—and all and the soldiers and servants who had died to defend the Vigil. He pawed blindly through the parchment, praying that Marjolaine would prowl the far edges of the desolate Void for all eternity.

And her Empress with her. This is her doing, as well.

He owed his family more respect than to collapse now. He wiped his face and then began reading through Rendon Howe's account books. By the time his meal was ready, he knew why there were no elves within the walls of Vigil's Keep. Once he found Howe's treasury, he could rebuild Highever from top to bottom... with accursed gold paid by Tevinter slavers for free Fereldan men and women. Highever's Alienage would exist now only in memory.

When his hands stopped shaking, he took pen and ink, and wrote a message to the Queen.

Your Majesty —

Vigil's Keep fell to me just before noon today. Crow assassins, hired by my late wife's family in Antiva, came secretly into the Keep before our engines broke the gate; and they assassinated the Arl of Amaranthine, Lady Delilah, and Lord Thomas Howe. With their deaths, resistance largely collapsed. I have sent my men in pursuit of the assassins, but there is great confusion, and they are not the only ones fleeing the siege. I examined Howe's accounts, and discovered a new outrage. It appears that he financed his rebellion by selling elves to Tevinter slavers. According to his records, he sold the entire Highever Alienage, his own servants in Amaranthine, and any unfortunate elf he could lay hands upon. In addition, under the guise of needing "labor crews," he paid Bann Vaughan to permit elves from the Denerim Alienage to be sent to Amaranthine, where they were sold and shipped away. Bann Esmerelle is implicated in this as

well. It is clear that she knew about the slavers, and accepted a portion of the proceeds. It is not likely that Bann Vaughan knew that the elves were to be sold, for then I think he would have demanded more to ship them north. This deed is a shame and a disgrace to Ferelden. As soon as the Vigil is secure, I shall take some of my troops north, to deal with Esmerelle and confront the Tevinters, if they have not already fled.

He hated the idea that anyone would believe him the sort of man who resorted to poison and treachery, and so he added a disclaimer —

I swear to you on the soul of my son that I had nothing to do with the murder of the Howes. I had every intention of sparing Lady Delilah, and also Lord Thomas, had he made his submission. That I cannot now show them mercy grieves me more than I can express.

*Believe me, Your Majesty, your most obedient servant,
Fergus Cousland, Teyrn of Highever*

He laid the quill aside, wishing that none of this had happened, and dropped his head into his hands.

And thus, Fergus Cousland had his victory, after a fashion; and took possession of Vigil's Keep.



CHAPTER 14

INTO
THE WILDS

AILAN, KING OF FERELDEN, ARRIVED AT OSTAGAR WITH MUCH FANFARE, PLEASED BEYOND MEASURE THAT HE HAD NOT MISSED THE ARRIVAL OF THE DALISH. The army, as a whole, was glad to see their handsome and cheerful young king.

Loghain was resigned, but not pleased at all. Things were going well, and he did not need Cailan's interference. Nor did he want to pretend that all was well, knowing that this traitor had betrayed his daughter and was planning to sell Ferelden to the Orlesians. From time to time, he played with the idea of confronting and arresting Cailan. Could one arrest a King? He had never heard of it, but surely kings were answerable to the law of the land. Or if they were not, they should be.

But he could not. They were in the middle of a war, and the King and the General could not admit to differences in front of the troops. Loghain was sure of Maric's Shield, but the rest of the army would fall apart if he set himself against the King. And that could not be allowed to happen.

The Orlesian plan might still fall through, now that the marriage treaty had gone astray. Loghain smiled bitterly when he thought of it, carefully locked away in his own correspondence chest. It would be months before Celene and Cailan realized that something was wrong. A great deal could happen before then.

The dwarven allies were presented to him, and Cailan was on his best and friendliest behavior. He even knew some of them, remembering them from his visit to Orzammar with his father some years before. He was always up for drinking parties, and so he and the dwarves got on rather well, all things considered.

"All we need are the Dalish," he exulted, "and the Archdemon might as well give it up altogether! How grand that will be, the day the Dalish come marching into Ostagar."

Days passed, but the Dalish did not march in. Watchful eyes at the top of the Tower of Ishal were trained on all the approaches to Ostagar, but they did not see their elven allies.

The Dalish did not march in, because the Dalish did not march at all. Their culture was not the sort that marched, hundreds of feet tramping the earth in unison, trumpets blaring, making as much noise as possible. Instead, they drifted in one evening at sunset, indistinguishable from rock and tree, from vine and trailing bush. Over fifty Dalish were actually within the walls of the fortress before a shocked guard noticed a tattooed elf peering down at him from the branches of a whitewood tree

on the north side of Ostagar Gorge. The unprofessional oath he bellowed turned heads right and left. Very shortly, weapons were seized and a trumpet blatted out an alarm.

"The Dalish, Your Majesty!" an officer bawled out, bursting into the council room. "They're here!" Loghain scowled at the man.

Cailan turned, his face bright with his widest, whitest smile. "They been spotted on the road?"

"No, Your Majesty! They're here! Right here in camp! They crept in like shadows. Reckon it was *magic!*"

Stunned looks were exchanged, and the senior command, men and dwarves both, hurried down the winding stairs and out into the cool air of twilight.

Ser Cauthrien was glaring down at a semicircle of slender and tattooed elves, declaring that the manner of their arrival was contrary to the law of arms. "— and it is customary to announce one's presence at the gates, instead of simply infiltrating the camp! We might have mistaken you for darkspawn and shot you!" She saw the King hurrying forward and gestured at him, "See how you have discomposed the King!"

"Oh, I am sorry!" apologized a pretty elf woman, her enormous green eyes luminous with sympathy, an appealing burr in her voice. She gave Cailan a vague, sweet smile. "You're the king, then? My, you are tall and shiny. Sorry, King. We didn't mean to frighten you. We were just being... er... Elvish. We thought you might be at supper, and we

didn't like to interrupt... Where is Bronwyn? I like Bronwyn. I thought she would be here... And Danith? I'm supposed to report to the Warden. *The Warden. A Warden...*"

Alistair, slightly behind the King and Loghain, gave her a shy wave and a grin. "Bronwyn's off to find Zathrian's clan. Danith, too. I'm Alistair. Senior Warden Alistair. I'm afraid you'll have to make do with me."

"Oh, that's very kind of you. You're just as nice as Bronwyn. Tall, mind you, but nice all the same. In fact, you're all... tall... Oh, wait, I'm supposed to say something..." She straightened her thin little shoulders and declared, "'We are the Dalish, Grey Warden, and we are here, according to our oath!'" She cocked her head. "There now, I think I remembered all the words that time."

The human nobles were in varying states of shock, delight, wry amusement, and fury. Cailan was quite enchanted with the elves' appearance: so wild, so free, so picturesque – and in the young woman's case, so exquisite. Her tattoos enhanced her high cheekbones and dainty pointed jaw.

Loghain glanced at her, saw she was pretty, and understood that she had no more idea than a cat of how humans conducted themselves. He was more interested in two of the archers lounging gracefully behind her – the two with grey in their hair. He knew them...

"Thanovir! Maynriel!"

"*Andaran atish'an*, Loghain!" Thanovir answered cheerily. "It is many years since you led us in battle."

Arls Wulffe and Bryland and a number of the banns relaxed slightly. These must be some of Loghain's Night Elves, the scouts he had organized during the Rebellion. That Loghain knew them and apparently was vouching for their reliability gave them considerable validation among the humans. The pretty girl must be the daughter of some clan chief or other, leading the elves just as noble youths sometimes led human forces – with the quiet support of experienced soldiers.

"That's Merrill, our Keeper," Thanovir informed Loghain, still beaming to see an old comrade-in-arms. Loghain was not looking too badly, either. Older, of course, but they were all older.

"Keeper, eh?" Loghain said, lifting a brow. Personally, he thought that fey little girl needed a Keeper herself.

Maynriel looked up at Loghain, mildly admonishing. "She is our Keeper on this journey, and has led us well."

"Then," beamed Cailan, preferring a pretty girl to Loghain's greying old cronies any day, "she shall be welcomed as befits the representative of our worthy Dalish allies." He inclined his blond head to Merrill, with his most winsome smile. "You are most welcome, my lady! Most welcome, indeed!"

"Indeed you are, Keeper," Loghain agreed, remembering his manners, and that these were valuable allies. "There are no archers in Thedas to equal the Dalish!"

More Dalish arrived and now were let in properly –

through the gate. A dozen aravels – the landships of the Dalish – came in with them, pulled by white halla, which were of more interest to the army as a whole than the elves themselves. Loghain was more concerned about how easily the Dalish has infiltrated his fortress. Merrill explained how very simple it was to slide through gaps in the stones or up overhanging trees and move among the branches. Of course, those of them who were the very best at it went first.

"It would have been even easier on the south side of your big stone camp," she told Loghain, "but Maynriel said that might be too sneaky and smack of arrogance."

"Maynriel is a wise man, and no doubt will always give you sound advice," Loghain answered, carefully expressionless. She was a mage, of course. He knew that Dalish Keepers were mages. Was that why she was so... odd? Not that it mattered. Five hundred Dalish scouts and archers had just joined the Fereldan Army – two hundred more than he had hoped for – and he could bear with an eccentric young figurehead. For that matter, better her than a swine like Vaughan or a brash fool like Cailan. To her credit, this innocent little girl did not remind him in the least of the elven spy Katriel, who had been a city elf, a sophisticated seductress, and a foul traitor.

Others were not so pleased to see the Dalish.

"Look at those knife ears!" sneered Bann Vaughan to his companions. "Painted and half-naked! They're nothing more than animals."

"That's true, but –" his friend Lord Braden advised him, "– the King thinks a lot of them. It's a lot of nonsense, of course, but it wouldn't do to go against him..."

"– And they're armed to the teeth," Lord Jonaley pointed out. "They're animals, right enough, but they're *wild* animals, Vaughan, not tame brutes like the ones at home who've at least learned to live indoors."

"Ha!" Vaughan agreed, barking a laugh. "Well said, Jonaley! Nothing more than wild animals. Just so. One can hardly blame Loghain for making what use he can of them. If they are here, and set to fighting darkspawn, they can't be murdering or thieving elsewhere! The darkspawn will thin them out a bit."

"That Keeper of theirs is a pretty thing," Braden remarked. "I wonder if Dalish women give good sport? I daresay they go at it like rabbits. If we hang about near their camp, we shall probably be able to watch them!"

Vaughan laughed heartily at the suggestion. Jonaley merely replied. "Perhaps so...but they're armed to the *teeth*..."

"Carver!" called Alistair. "You've got a visitor!"

"Ooo! A visitor?" smirked Oghren. "Is she pretty?"

"She's a he," Alistair replied, coming into the Wardens' quarters. "I don't know about pretty." He raised his brows at Carver. "He says he's Adam Hawke and your brother; and he looks a lot like you, so he probably is."

Carver slumped despondently, trying to blend into the

corner where he was sitting, sharpening his eating knife. Adam was here, trying to ruin everything. *As usual.*

"How wonderful to have a brother," sighed Leliana. "I wish I'd had a brother... or a sister! That is what I like most about the Grey Wardens. We are all like a big family, yes?"

"Better than *my* family," growled Carver. "Couldn't you tell him I was on patrol?"

"No," Alistair shot back. "And I agree with Leliana that it's a pretty special thing to have a brother."

Who at least admits it, he thought to himself. Cailan was perfectly polite to Alistair, but it was because he was a Grey Warden. There was always a wall between them: the wall that declared, "*I am the King, and I have no equals.*"

Carver grumbled, but got up, tucking his little knife away. Adam was waiting, just outside the door. He must have done some fancy talking to get into the Tower of Ishal and all the way to the Wardens' quarters. Adam could always talk anybody into anything, of course. Everybody loved Adam. He was wearing a light leather vest that somehow looked debonair and expensive, though Carver knew it was a mercenary's castoff, carefully polished and repaired. Everything looked good on Adam. It was the perfectly muscled arms, probably.

"Carver!" Adam said, seeing him. "We've been worried sick about you!" He saw the people in the room coming to have a look at him. "Won't you introduce me to your friends?"

"No." Carver glared at him, remembering all the times

that his friends had met Adam and somehow become Adam's friends instead of his. The Grey Wardens were *his* friends, and he was not giving them away to Adam.

"Don't be childish," Adam said, ignoring him. He smiled charmingly at the Wardens, and gave them a wave. "Alistair, isn't it? I'm Adam Hawke, Carver's older brother. We hadn't heard from him in a while, and our mother asked me to come to Ostagar to see if he was all right."

Alistair responded to the infectious smile, and took the offered hand. "Good to meet you. Carver's been great. Not everybody's here, but over there is Leliana and that's Morrigan. And over there is Oghren. Most of us are out right now, but before you are the Grey Wardens' finest. More or less."

"Excuse us." Adam Hawke said abruptly, steering his brother down the hall and away from the quarters. Carver went, but shrugged off his brother's heavy hand. They paused, glaring at each other.

"So it's true?" Hawke asked, his brow furrowed. "You've become a Grey Warden? Carver, you should have talked to me before taking such a drastic step!"

"Why?" Carver demanded. "When I left with the army, you knew I wanted to make my own way in the world. The Wardens are my friends, and they think I'm good enough to join. They're important people. Did you know the Warden-Commander is Lady Bronwyn Cousland, the sister of the Teyrn of Highever? She's really been really nice to me. I get to call her 'Bronwyn,' just like all the other Wardens.

I like being here. I'm doing my bit for the war, and I don't have to hide from the Templars, or watch what I say."

"You haven't even asked about Mother and Bethany," Hawke said, shaking his head. "Carver, what have they done to you?"

"They've accepted me! And I'm not the tag-along little brother to them. I can't go on living in your shadow, Adam!" He rubbed an irritated hand over his hair and said, "After all this is over, I'll come home and see everyone."

"That might be harder than you expect," his brother told him, jaw set. "Mother wants us to move to Kirkwall. She's afraid of the darkspawn."

"We're *holding* the darkspawn!" Carver said, indignant.

"For how long?" Adam frowned, leaning back against the wall. "Now that Father's gone, she's been thinking about going home. Uncle Gamlen will probably put us up at the family estate. She's tired of living in country cottages, always on the run. The Amells are a noble family, and Mother misses the kind of life she knew as a young girl."

Carver snorted. "What did she think was going to happen when she ran off with an apostate? And how does she know that our uncle wants anything to do with her? Didn't her own parents disinherit her?"

"She thinks he's forgiven her. She wants to go home. She wants to be somewhere safe: somewhere that doesn't have armies of darkspawn two days march away."

"She'll never be safe: not with Bethany living with her. If she wants to be safe, Bethany should turn herself in to

the Circle of Magi – or, you know what? She could come and join the Grey Wardens too! They have mages! That Morrigan – the really gorgeous brunette – she's a mage, you know. And she was an apostate, and lived on the run all her life, just like Father and Bethany!"

"Is that what you want for Bethany?" Adam asked coldly. "You want her in danger, facing soulless monsters, facing a horrible death? Nobody in his right mind wants to be a Grey Warden! It would absolutely kill mother to lose Bethany, too!"

"She hasn't *lost* me!" Carver insisted. "How can you expect me to stay home and sit by the fire all my life? I'm sick of being a farm laborer, working from sunup to sundown, bringing home a pittance and handing it over to you, and then you doling out some coppers for spending money if I'm a very, very good boy. Is that what you want for me? To be a mindless peasant, grubbing in the dirt until my back gives out?"

"You're being ridiculous! Of course I don't want that! We'll all go to Kirkwall. We'll live with Uncle Gamlen and find some sort of positions there in the city. The Amell name is well-known there. We can live like nobles, and Mother can spend the rest of her life in comfort."

"Everybody knows that Kirkwall is crawling with Templars," Carver growled. "You're taking *Bethany* there? How long do you think your dream of being a nobleman is going to last? Until the Templars kick in the front door?"

"They don't kick in the front doors of noble houses,"

Adam said, his tone superior and contemptuous. "Bethany would be better protected there." He took a deep breath. "Look. If you're absolutely determined to throw your life away, I can't stop you. We're leaving Lothering in twelve days. We'll take ship in Gwaren. If you want to see Mother and Bethany before we go, come to see us. Otherwise, this is farewell, probably forever."

"You want to go – so go," Carver sneered. "You're supposed to be the great fighter, but I don't see you standing up for Ferelden. I guess I understand now. You want to be a noble, and you can't be one here. Go off to Kirkwall, and be Uncle Gamlen's poor relation, if that's what you want. I'll come and see Mother and Bethany. And I'll tell them the truth: they're safer staying in Lothering than traveling through the Brecilian Passage and then taking a long and dangerous voyage through pirate-infested waters, to arrive in a strange city mostly run by the Chantry." He added bitterly, "And I am not throwing my life away. I'm making it *mean* something." He left without another word, not trusting himself to look at his brother again.

He slammed the door of the Wardens' quarters behind him.

"So much for having a *family*," he muttered. "They're leaving for Kirkwall in twelve days. I need to go see my mother and sister."

Alistair was unsure what to say. He remembered all of Duncan's teachings: how the Grey Wardens renounced title and family; how the mission came before all. Still, if

his mother was only two days away and was leaving the country forever, he would want to see her. Suddenly he thought of Fiona, living her lonely life among the Wardens, keeping her secrets; and he felt close to weeping.

"Of course you can go. Not alone, maybe. We'll work something out, I promise. Teyrn Loghain is taking some of us on patrol for a day or two. When we get back, we'll talk it over."

The King was still sleeping off last night's celebration when Loghain's scouting expedition left Ostagar.

Loghain had been prepared for the King to celebrate the elves' arrival at length. While the King was in his cups, Loghain went quietly about, speaking to key people; asking them to refrain from drinking so much that they would be indisposed the following morning.

The darkspawn had been quiet for ten days now. It made him uneasy. Had something changed? His scouts were not giving him the information he needed. Either they were turned back after spotting large parties of darkspawn, or they never returned at all. On his detailed map of Ostagar and the Korcari Wilds was an ominous red circle to the east. That was where the first Wardens on the spot had seen a wide hole in the earth, big enough for an ogre to squeeze up through. The two men had not been able to get close, but had reported that the darkspawn were enlarging the opening, busy as ants on an anthill. What was it like now? Was it fortified? Was the Archdemon there?



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It was time for a sweep of the Wilds, and for that he needed not a mere scouting party, but a fairly strong expeditionary force.

Furthermore, he needed to see things for himself, as far as possible. Interpreting other men's observations was tricky. There was no substitute for personal reconnaissance. He spoke to Bryland at the feast, and persuaded the man to limit his intake, since he would be in temporary command in Loghain's absence. He informed the King of his intentions just as Cailan was attempting a flirtation with an oblivious Keeper Merrill. As he expected, Cailan listened to him with half an ear, and agreed to anything he wanted as long as Cailan was left alone.

The gates of Ostagar swung wide, and they moved out into the fresh breeze that came with the red sunrise. It was good to be on the march again with Thanovir and Maynriel. They had brought a dozen of their youngsters along, prime archers and trackers. Lord Ronus Dace and his second, Frandlin Ivo agreed to join them, accompanied by a mixed company of their own men and the Legion of the Dead. Sergeant Darrow headed a score of picked soldiers from Maric's Shield. Keili, the young Healer who had attached herself to him, walked along with the soldiers. They were used to her now, and accepted her to a certain extent. What reservations they had seemed to stem more from her youth and frail physique than her magic. Nobody objected to being healed, of course.



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And, of course, there were the Wardens.

It was useless to wish that Bronwyn were here to share the adventure with him. He was more enamored than any man of his age had a right to be. He missed her, and wished her good fortune in her journey north. He could picture her plotting with Anora, and the image warmed him. He hoped they got on together.

Instead, he had Alistair, cheerful and admirably sober. The boy had learned at least one thing from the fiasco of the great battle last Bloomingtide: and that was not to risk all the Wardens in one place at one time. With him were the Orlesian bard and the Healer who looked enough like him to be his brother and a son of Maric. Their new boy and the big Qunari were here, too. The rest must have remained at camp.

Young Carver was pestering Alistair with questions.

"— but I hear you were raised by *Arl Eamon of Redcliffe* —"
"Did you hear me say that?" Alistair replied, with mock astonishment. "Actually, I was raised by dogs: big flying dogs from the Anderfels. Smelly and drooly, and devout Andrasteans, every one of them."

Carver made a face. "Can't you be serious about *anything*?"

"It sounds serious to me," Anders declared, straight-faced. "Being raised by flying dogs is seriously *funny*."

A sweet trill of laughter from the Orlesian. "I miss having Scout with us. He is so big and dependable. I had not understood about Fereldans and dogs until I met him. When I was young and living in the house of Lady Cecile

she had a dog, but it was a horrid little lapdog that yipped until my head ached, and always bit at my ankles. She called it... *Bonbon*."

Loghain winced, picturing the little abomination all too clearly. Orlesians bred their dogs in all sorts of perverted ways, and he had seen Orlesian ladies with those creatures, feeding them sweetmeats while Fereldans starved.

"...One day," Leliana went on, smiling at the memory, "Bonbon leaped out and bit my leg. I thought it was a rat, and I kicked as hard as I could. Bonbon *flew* through the air —" she smirked — "and never troubled me again."

"You kicked a *dog*?" Carver asked, horrified. Loghain snorted a reluctant laugh. It wasn't like it was a *real* dog. Perhaps the bard was not as bad as he thought.

"Warden!" he called, looking back at Alistair. The boy flushed guiltily, but a faint grin lingered. The expression was so like Maric that Loghain stared for a moment. How had this boy grown to be so like his father, when he had never known him? Cailan was not like Maric at all. Nor did he resemble Rowan in the least, for that matter.

"My lord?" Alistair asked, moving up to speak to him.

"Walk with me," Loghain said. "And let me know the moment you sense darkspawn."

"Well," Alistair said, "around Ostagar we sense them all the time, but it's like a faint noise in the background. We know they're around, and within a day's march or so, but they're not in the next room, so to speak."

"Then let me know when they knock on the front door. All right?"

"Yes, ser. My lord." The boy looked like he wanted to say something else, so Loghain tried not to look too repressive. Maric would have been chattering a mile a minute by this time, forcing answers out of Loghain.

Instead, it was clear that Loghain would have to do the talking. He pulled out his map and showed the red-circled portion to Alistair. "How much did Duncan tell you about that first scouting mission back in Drakonis?"

"Quite a bit. And I heard more first-hand from Belarion, who was one of the Wardens who went. They camped by the old Warden outpost, and kept sensing darkspawn really strongly. The next day they found this huge thing like a sinkhole, swarming with the brutes." He pointed at the map, and asked "May I?" At Loghain's nod, he pointed to a small square, indicating a building. "That's the old outpost. You see it's only about a quarter-day's march from the fissure. There's not much there anymore, but at least there are walls, and bits of a roof. It's where we first met Morrigan. She took us to her mother — I mean — Fle-meth, who'd been keeping the Warden treaties safe." His shoulders hunched, as a shadow passed over his face.

"She did that for her own purposes," Loghain told him sternly. "Not for any altruistic reason. She *wanted* the Wardens to feel indebted to her. Does —" he made himself use the witch's name — "*Morrigan* — know why?"



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Alistair shook his head. "Whatever she wanted, it died with her. Good riddance. She always gave me the creeps."

Loghain huffed a laugh. "You weren't the only one."

"Really?" Alistair asked, curiosity overcoming his reserve. "You met Flemeth? I mean, other than the other day, when we killed her?"

"Long ago," Loghain said, "when I was on the run with Maric. We were guests – prisoners for a time – in her hut. She pretended to tell us our futures." He waited for the boy to quiz him about it, but Alistair only nodded, his face closed off. Loghain realized, with an unpleasant shock, that Alistair believed he had no right to ask anything about his father. Or perhaps he really did not care about a man who had not taken care of him. How could he rebuke him for that? Placing Alistair with Eamon was a mistake. Loghain had told Maric so at the time. Eamon was a bizarre choice for guardian, considering that he was the brother of Maric's wife. He stole another look at the lad.

On the other hand, if Maric believed it more important to protect Cailan's rights, he could not have chosen better. Who else would be so likely as the blood kin of the royal heir to keep the bastard child down? Had Alistair been given to the Couslands or to *any* of the great nobles, for that matter, he would have been raised, inevitably, as a secret rival. Loghain glanced at him again. He might even have been married off to Bronwyn by now, though that would be tantamount to a challenge to Cailan. It was hard to imagine this diffident



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young lad as a schemer, but there were be plenty who would have been glad to do his scheming for him.

"She told Maric," Loghain said, after a time, "that there would be a Blight, but that he would not live to see it. I thought it was ridiculous at the time, since there hadn't been a Blight in over four hundred years anyway. It was the sort of thing any sham fortune teller could come up with."

Alistair considered this. "She liked to pretend to be all-knowing, but since we know that there are still legendary Old Gods out there, it was only logical to say there's going to be a Blight *someday*. Saying it wouldn't be in his lifetime would have been a good guess. What did she say to –" he stopped abruptly and grimaced. "Sorry, my lord. I was just being nosy." He pointed at his face. "See the nose?"

Loghain smiled wryly. "I do. You want to know what she predicted for me. She told me I would betray Maric. Repeatedly. I think it's fairly clear that I did not."

"Well, that's good, isn't it? It proves that she wasn't all-knowing and all-powerful after all. She just liked to tell people depressing things and make them feel bad about themselves. I never liked her anyway." He laughed in his self-deprecating way. "Not that she would care. I sort of thought she liked Bronwyn a little, but they talked privately when we found Teyrn Fergus, and whatever she said really upset Bronwyn. Anybody could see it. Bronwyn wanted to get away from her as fast as she could."

"Sensible girl." Loghain would have paid good coin to

know what the Witch of the Wilds had said.

"But this is not so bad!" cried Leliana, exploring the ruins of the Grey Warden outpost. "This could be fixed, yes? Some good dwarf masons, a little cleaning... I think it has possibilities!"

Anders chuckled, catching Alistair's eye. "*Women.*"

Sten took Leliana seriously. "The curtain walls should be rebuilt. It could indeed be made defensible against a middling force of darkspawn, depending upon the number of projectile weapons available to the defenders."

It was just the place to rest and have a midday meal. Alistair examined the site. The last time he had been here, they had been distracted by *Morrigan*. It was an interesting place. He liked the idea of the Wardens having a hideaway of their own; not beholden to a King for house-room in his Palace. This was really not a bad little stronghold. Leliana and Sten were right. He was no expert in fortifications, but it seemed to him that the surrounding marshes were a defense in themselves. Maybe when the Blight was over, it would be nice to spend time here, where Wardens could hunt and fish... and practice their rites in private.

Absently, he munched his rations, testing the mossy stonework, startling a storm of bats from a dark, crumbling lower chamber. The weather was holding well. They could just —

He hissed. The ever-lasting scratchiness of darkspawn suddenly spiked, like a needle in his brain.

"Teyrn Loghain!"

Leliana felt it too. "Darkspawn!" she cried.

These were skilled and seasoned warriors, and so there was not chaos, but order, as the differing troops took their positions and the archers readied their arrows. Darkspawn howled and chuckled, coming closer, drawn to the Wardens like metal filings to a magnet. They were charging, without art, without subterfuge, up the hill to the north, and they were met by Dalish arrows.

And Leliana's. Loghain noted the woman's accuracy of aim and economy of motion. No wasteful flourishes or pointless posturing. Arrows were drawn, nocked, and loosed in a single, fluid motion. She was not unworthy to draw bow beside the Dalish, and that, Loghain believed, was praise enough for any archer. Then the surviving hurlocks rushed them.

It was nasty, brutish, and short. Darkspawn took a lot of killing, but that was just what the scouting party was able to deal out. An ogre lumbered toward them, bringing up the rear, and was blinded and stumbling by the time he met the party's swords and axes. Anders and Keili moved in, healing any wounds or injuries immediately.

"Alistair!" Carver yelled, pointing triumphantly to a tiny flask. "I got that vial of darkspawn blood you wanted!"

Alistair, Anders, and Leliana facepalmed simultaneously. Loghain hid his smirk. Leliana hurried over to scold the boy.

"He's Joining *tonight*," Alistair muttered to Anders. The

mage nodded, with a wry smile.

No one else had noticed Carver's indiscretion. "Are these darkspawn an isolated band," wondered Lord Ronus, "or are they an advance guard?"

"I wish we could see past those hills," Alistair complained, pointing to the north. "I suppose we'll just have to go there."

Loghain frowned. They were in a sound, defensible position here, and would not be further on, on the treacherous marshes. While he was considering it, Anders whispered in Alistair's ear.

"What? Well, why didn't you tell us this *before*?" Alistair bit his lip and approached Loghain, lowering his voice. "My lord, I need to tell you something... privately."

Loghain watched the tall mage fidget and make faces. He stepped aside with Alistair, and gave him a sharp nod.

"We can get a scout past the hills pretty fast. It appears..." Alistair's tone grew biting, "...that Morrigan is not the only shape-shifter among the Wardens. Anders says he can do a raven. It's how he and Morrigan got into the Circle Tower to steal Flemeth's grimoire. But he doesn't want anybody else to know."

Anders responded to Loghain's suspicious glare with a light-hearted shrug, and an innocent, "Well, *what can I say*?" spreading of his hands.

Loghain jerked his head at the crumbling outpost. "Get him out of sight and let him do it."

While the archers were collecting their arrows and the

warriors were wiping their blades, a large black bird rose from behind them and winged swiftly to the northeast. Loghain furrowed his brow. Anders was an odd creature. No doubt he was right to keep such a skill to himself, for the Chantry labeled any magic that made it harder to control mages as "evil." In this case, it was extremely useful, and Loghain refined his idea of a mage in every unit in the army to include shape-shifting scouts. There were too many times he could have used a bird's-eye view before going into battle. He had never had the least desire to be a mage, himself, but this one ability would be... intriguing.

A heady thrill of magic shivered over his skin. It was that *girl* again.

Alistair took his whetstone to his blade, wanting to fill up the time until Anders returned. Things were not going so badly. Teyrn Loghain seemed to think well of his swordsmanship, and had not said anything critical about the Wardens' party. He had even unbent a bit, and told him a story about his father – of course, without actually saying that *Maric was his father*.

What would it have been like, if the King had acknowledged him, and had brought him to live in the Palace? Teyrn Loghain would have been a fixture from his earliest years. Like an uncle... sort of. What would it have been like to grow up in comfort, taught by the best tutors, studying Orlesian and Arcanum, and learning about border dis-

putes and trade agreements; and all the rest of the things that made his head ache just to think of? Would he even have been the same person? Would he have become someone convinced he had the right to treat people however he liked? A man like... Bann Vaughan... or really, like his brother sometimes.

Probably. Maybe. It was hard to say. Not all nobles were noble. On the other hand, some of them were. Nor were all oppressed elves thieves, nor all dwarves greedy. Maybe he would have been the same Alistair, only with better clothes.

Carver had finished his bread and hard cheese and was coming over, with that *look* in his eye.

"Really," Carver whispered. "What was it like, growing up in a real *castle*?"

"Wait until Bronwyn gets back," Alistair advised. "You can ask *her* what it's like to grow up in a real *castle*. I lived in the stables. It was nice and warm there."

"But –"

"Carver," Alistair said kindly, "I'm a *bastard*. You do understand what that means? It means that nobody wants to be embarrassed by having you around. I lived in the stables, and when I was old enough, I was sent to the Chantry, where I was taught to read and write, because nobody could be bothered before then. Then, by great good fortune, I was recruited into the Grey Wardens over the Grand Cleric's protests. It was the best thing that ever happened to me, I kid you not."

"But if Arl Eamon was your fath –"

Alistair cut him off. "Not talking about this with you. Not now, not ever. Conversation over. I think you need to go stand over there by Sten now. This is your Senior Warden talking."

"Oh. All right."

To his dismay, Teyrn Loghain was looking at him. Frowning, as usual. The Teyrn beckoned him over, and Alistair went, mentally dragging his feet, hoping that Loghain was not going to want to talk about his questionable birth.

He, of course, was not that lucky.

"The stables? Really?"

Alistair made his face bland and inquiring. "Why not, my lord? I made myself useful there, and only annoyed the Arlessa a few times a day, instead of constantly."

"I don't think that Maric intended –" Loghain paused, seeing something hardening in the young man's face. He spoke more quietly. "Even if your mother was a servant, Eamon should have –"

"She's not a *servant*," Alistair interrupted, sudden anger boiling over, remembering the looks, the jokes, the filthy names the boys had called him, the things they had called his mother... "My father kept her a secret too. Even a *servant* would be better than an elf, a mage, an Orlesian... and a Grey Warden."

Loghain stared at him blankly, and then realization struck the older man. There had been a young woman along on Maric's lunatic outing to the Deep Roads over

twenty years ago. "Of course! The elf! I should have known..." He looked at Alistair, as if seeing him for the first time. "You said 'she's not a servant.' Are you saying your mother is still alive?"

His voice just for the Teyrn's ears, Alistair took the plunge and said, "When Warden Riordan came to warn us that the Orlesians were trying to kidnap us, Fiona —my mother — was with him. She didn't tell me she was my mother until later: she said Bronwyn figured it out and talked her into confessing. I'm awfully glad she did. It made it better to know that I wasn't — that my father hadn't — oh, Maker, I was glad to know that my father hadn't raped my mother or even just bullied her into submitting. I know about nobles and servant girls. I've seen it from the servants' side, and the thought made me sick. Anyway," he said hurriedly, his courage and anger failing at Loghain's expression, "it was the greatest thing in the world to meet my mother. The Wardens made her give me up. She didn't want to, but she didn't have a choice. If she didn't do what the Wardens wanted, she would have been forced back to the Circle and then I would have been dumped on the Chantry's doorstep. So Duncan helped her and she brought me to... my father. And he sent me to Arl Eamon. She didn't mean for me to grow up in a stable either, but it's fine now. It all worked out for the best. I'm a Warden, after all."

Loghain took a breath. And another. It was oddly painful that Maric's son looked upon being a Warden as the

best possible outcome for him. "Maric would never have forced himself on a woman. He never had to. He was *charming*..." He could see that the boy was unconvinced.

"Lots of nobles think they're '*charming*,' my lord," Alistair shot back. "Probably Bann Vaughan thinks he's '*charming*,' too. I can tell you that something you never want is to be the only man in a room with four women when one of them is talking about what Bann Vaughan did to her. I thought they'd skin me alive. But that doesn't matter. My father and mother cared about each other, even if only for a little while. She cared enough about me that she didn't want me to be a prisoner of the Orlesians."

"Not a very *loyal* Orlesian, then," Loghain remarked.

"She's a Warden, my lord," Alistair said, "and besides, from what she told me, mages and elves have no particular reason to think Orlais is all that wonderful."

At last Bronwyn's curious adventure at the Orlesian border made sense to Loghain. She and Alistair had been saved, not by the fabled Grey Warden brotherhood, but by the boy's mother. Loghain struggled to remember the young mage's face. An elf with short-cropped hair was all he could come up with. Most elves were good-looking, and she would have been the only young woman Maric would have seen for over a month. They would have bonded over deadly danger in the Deep Roads. For Maric, that would have been more than enough.

"Look!" Alistair whispered urgently, "It's Anders!"



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Out of the northeast winged a sharp-edged shadow, black against the sky. Loghain was annoyed that this interesting conversation was at an end... for now. He was not sure what to make of this personable young warrior: this unacknowledged prince. If the day came when Cailan had to be deposed, would Alistair be a suitable candidate to take the throne? Nothing indicated that he had the least interest in being king. And he was, after all, the son of an elf, a mage, an Orlesian, and a Grey Warden. But he was also a son of Maric.

Anders made his discreet appearance from the shadows of the outpost, and Loghain and Alistair talked to him for some time. The mage had seen a great deal of interest and was provided with parchment and sharpened charcoal. Soon he was busily sketching the vast cavity he had seen.

"And I saw more than the one opening," he told them. "There are two others within a few leagues of each other. They're smaller, but the darkspawn are out there working on widening them. There's also a lot of movement to the east that we might need to check out."

They would have a few days' work before them, Loghain decided. It might be possible to thwart the darkspawn by destroying or damaging their access points. However, they must be cautious. His fear had been that the darkspawn had found Ostagar too well defended, and had decided to erupt somewhere else, like Gwaren or South Reach or a few miles from Denerim: some place where no one was prepared for them. He needed to sit down with the dwarves



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and study their maps of the Deep Roads at greater length, and place lookouts at vulnerable spots, where the darkspawn might most easily tunnel up to the surface. It might even be possible in future to lure a large force out of the Wilds, and destroy the darkspawn piecemeal. Anything that would weaken the Archdemon when it eventually made its appearance was very much to be desired.



Adaia funneled the sticky, sharp-smelling fluid into the flasks on her worktable. Afternoon light slanted through the windows of the workshop, and glittered through the brightly-colored, noxious liquids Adaia worked with.

Dworkin Glavonak, the dwarves' mad inventor, nodded approvingly. "A nice steady hand, lass. Like me." He grinned maniacally, sifting powdered lyrium onto a silverite tray. His lips moved as he counted to himself. Adaia had learned to tune him out. Dworkin always talked to himself. He came over and peered at her ingredients. "Enough for another batch. Try more madcap this time. A quarter-weight."

He went back to his own task, muttering happily to himself. Adaia found it very peaceful here. It was quiet at the Tower, too, since Alistair had taken some of the others and gone scouting with Teyrn Loghain. Adaia felt not the least regret in not being asked to go with them. She felt like a fish out of water in the Wilds.

There was a knock at the door.

"Get the door, lass."

A young elf boy was there, pert and restless. "Message for Master Glavonak. Arl Bryland needs to see you right away!"

"I'm busy!" Glavonak shrugged, "Sod all nobles anyway..."

"He really wants to see you," the boy insisted. "Something's gone wrong with one of the engines, and he needs you to figure it out."

"Ha!" cackled Dworkin. "Didn't he ask that smooth-talking brother of mine? I'll show him who the Master Engineer is!" He dithered a little longer over his mortar and pestle and scales, distracted by his work.

"Master!" the boy reminded him of his presence. "Arl Bryland!"

"All in good time..." Dworkin continued working, making notes and humming to himself. Adaia smirked. He was a funny fellow, but he had been kind to her, and had no more love for nobles than she herself. He had some very good ideas about protecting oneself too, and Adaia felt safer already. Arl Bryland could go hang, for all she cared. Virtuously, she went back to work on her acid bombs. Some of the flasks were smaller and rounder. She worked with those, filling them carefully with the compound, enjoying the sound of Dworkin's humming.

Time passed, and the boy fidgeted anxiously. Adaia felt a little sorry for him. He was probably expecting coin for delivering the message – and Master Dworkin – to the Arl.

"Maybe you'd better go, Master," she urged. "We don't need Arl Bryland angry with us."

"Hmph," he scoffed. "Nobles. They're the same everywhere!" Reluctantly, he set his mortar and pestle aside. "I shan't be long." He followed the boy out, still humming.

Adaia went back to work, frowning over her flasks. The simmering kettles kept the workshop pleasantly warm. She was so focused that she hardly heard the soft step, coming closer; or the creak of a leather-clad arm coming up behind her...

She could still put up a fight, even though there were two of them. Acid pooled on the floor from the broken flasks: acrid fumes dispersed throughout the room. They pinned her arms and gagged her, but she kicked back at an attacker's knee. He grunted at the sharp pain, and his fist smashed into the side of her head, stunning her briefly.

"I'll kill you, knife-eared bitch!"

"Quiet!" Jonaley hissed at the unlucky Braden. "Quick! Wrap her up in this, and we'll throw her over the horse!"

Adaia spat furiously as the length of coarse sacking descended over her. They bundled her up in it, half-smothering her. She could see light, a dirty brownish yellow, as she blinked against the bristling fibers, but she was disoriented, hardly knowing where they were carrying her. The gag stuffed in her mouth was nasty. She bit at it, raging and fearful.

The air changed: she was outside, and tried to make some sort of noise. Abruptly, she was lifted up and flung over the back of a horse, her nose crunching against the

flanks, cushioned only by her shroud-like wrappings. She struggled, futilely trying to wriggle off. The two young noblemen were laughing, excited and sly, like boys doing something they know could get them into trouble.

"Hurry up!" Jonaley complained, as Braden looped a rope under her and tied her to the saddle. The rope dug into her arm painfully. She would be badly bruised when they let her off the horse.

They were leaving Ostagar. They galloped out, shouting and hallooing at the guard like the drunken, bumptious wastrels they were. It must be the south gate, for Adaia would have recognized the sound of shod hooves on the bridge spanning Ostagar Gorge. No. They were heading south, into the high forest.

Her mind raced as she bumped and flailed, slipping back and forth, tugged and yanked by the rope binding her. The horse was galloping on earth now, not stone. She must find a way to escape them or to fight them or to stop them. Master Dworkin would return to find her gone. He knew she was supposed to wait for a Warden to escort her, but he might think she had stepped out to the latrine, or that Brosca had come for her earlier than usual. Yes, it was Brosca's turn this afternoon, and surely she wouldn't be late. When she found Adaia gone, she would give the alarm.

But that would be too late. She could not expect people to save her. It was save herself or nothing.

All too soon, Braden was reining the horse in, and the

dreaded voice of Vaughan was greeting his friends, smug and full of anticipation.

"Ha! You've got her! I've been waiting at least an hour!"

"You'll enjoy your present the more, Vaughan!" Jonaley called back. A few slashes with a belt knife, and Adaia was shoved roughly from the horse.

"And now you get to unwrap it!" laughed Braden.

He was using a knife. He was using a knife, and he was not being very careful with it. Adaia hissed as the blade slid along her leather armor, and she gave deep thanks to Bronwyn for finding armor for her and making her wear it. If she had to put up a fight, it might save her life.

The next few minutes were as ugly as she had always imagined they would be. The sacking was ripped away from her head, and her heart nearly failed her at the sight of Vaughan's gloating, fleshy face. Her expression must have displeased him.

"Doesn't know her place, does she?" he sneered, hauling her to her feet. He backhanded Adaia casually, saying, "You look as ugly as a three-copper whore, knife-ears. And that's more than you're worth. Get over here..."

They were in a clearing, surrounding by trees on three sides, backed up to the side of a hill. She searched the landscape desperately, looking for options. A foot was out to trip her. She went down, heels of her hands burning as they scraped across the stony ground. The men kicked at her, joking among themselves, as if she were not a living

being at all, but a toy to be played with.

"We'll bend her over that," Vaughan declared, gesturing vaguely. "I chose it just for her."

Adaia glanced up quickly. They were kicking her toward a fallen tree.

"We can tie her hands behind her if she makes too much trouble," suggested Braden.

Adaia knew that once they bound her, she was as good as dead.

"I want that armor off her," Vaughan said. "Too good for a tart like her."

"She won't be needing it anyway," Jonaley agreed, nudging her between her legs with his boot. "Move along there, whore. No high-born lady to protect you now."

"She won't even know what happened to you," Vaughan assured her suavely. "Poor Bronwyn will realize that she was taken in by a little knife-eared ingrate who ran away the first chance she had."

Sickened, Adaia knew they had been waiting for this chance. Bronwyn had gone north; half her friends had gone with Teyrn Loghain. Would anyone even come looking for her?

"I brought some wine," Braden remembered, heading back to his horse. "Wait for me."

Adaia moved quickly, with a swift crabwise motion, ignoring the pain in her arm. She needed to get her feet under her and run. Braden was moving away, and when he came back with the wine they would be distracted...

"Wait..." Braden called, bottle in hand. The other two men stopped their sport for moment to look his way. The young nobleman asked, "Did you hear that?"

A pause. "What?" Vaughan snapped, annoyed at the delay.

Glass exploded, shards glittering in the mild southern sun. Wine splashed like blood, spattering Braden's fine doublet. Everyone froze. The heavy arrow went on, thudding into the underbrush.

A harsh chuckle echoed off the hills: a gloating *ha-ha-ha* that Adaia recognized in an instant of pure panic.

"Darkspawn!" she shrieked. The horses, smelling the foulness, reared and screamed. More arrows whizzed past. Adaia glimpsed Vaughan's face: a comical mixture of outrage and terror. He was looking this way and that, probably for men to order to protect him. There was no one but himself, his two drunken friends, and a battered elf girl.

Who was running, just as fast as she could. Between the shouts of the men and the screams of the horses, the darkspawn had no time for her at all. In the distance, she could see the Tower of Ishal, and she fixed her will on it, hurling a log, her feet hardly seeming to touch the ground. The screams and shouts and chuckles faded, blending into the bird-calls of the forest. Adaia ran on.

Vaughan hacked desperately at the huge hurlock. They were supposed to be safe, here at Ostagar. The darkspawn had been quiet for days. What had gone wrong?

A shattering blow stunned his arm, and his sword fell, sticking point first into the ground. Vaughan gaped at the sight, and it seemed at first that it would be easy to pick it up again, until he looked again and saw bright blood pumping from the stump of his wrist. He shrieked in disbelief.

"Braden! Help me! Jonaley!"

Braden, eyes open and glazed, sagged against a white-wood tree, nailed there by a sword.

More arrows hummed past Vaughan's ear, like angry wasps. One was sticking out of Jonaley's mouth. Redder than wine, blood spurted under his bulging eyes. A tottering, swaying moment, and a genlock rushed up and bowled Jonaley over, squealing as it buried a pair of daggers in the young man's belly.

Vaughan staggered, looking desperately for help. He croaked a last defiance as the grinning hurlock reached back for the beheading stroke.

"Don't you know... who... I am?"

The head struck the ground, bounced twice, and then rolled some distance before the hurlock claimed it. The hunting party finished killing the horses, while the hurlock took a moment to display its trophy on a sharpened stick.

Adaia picked herself up from another fall. She had rolled down a hill, scratching herself in some rashvine bushes. The Tower looked bigger now. Longing for something to drink, she set off again, eyes seeking out the best and quickest path.

She must have run miles by now. What would happen to her when she got back? Would she be accused of murdering Vaughan, or at the least, of luring him to his death?

She ran through a stand of dragonthorn, twisting among the gnarled trunks, afraid every moment of hearing darkspawn on her trail. Her breath sobbed in her ears. She had never run so far in her life. How could she, when the world was measured by the length of one filthy alley?

Among the trees, she lost track of her beacon: the Tower of Ishal. She prayed to any listening god, shemlen or elven, that she was not running directly back to the darkspawn.

Another clearing. She ran through the dappled light, remembering the taste of water. Her feet were growing heavy, and now crushed the verdure underfoot with hissing little thuds.

"Adaia!"

The elf left the ground in fright, trying to double back in the air until she saw who was grabbing at her, holding her straight...

"Brosca!"

The dwarf girl was there, face murderous. Behind her was Cullen, frowning and concerned, and Oghren, puffing with effort. Morrigan looked amused.

"You see? 'Twas nothing after all! She made fools of fools. How unsurprising."

Two Dalish trackers leaned on their bows, watching the scene with mild curiosity.

"Stone save us!" the dwarf girl huffed. "You're hurt! I'll



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kill that bastard!"

Adaia began laughing. "Get in line," she gasped, breathless. "Behind the darkspawn." She guzzled from the canteen Cullen offered her. Water was the Maker's gift.

"Darkspawn?" Cullen asked urgently.

"Up in the hills," Adaia told him, slurping. "They took me up there for their sport, and the darkspawn spoiled their fun. They might be still fighting them, for all I know. I ran."

Morrigan laughed lightly. "And now," she said, "we shall track them and attempt to save their worthless lives. Sadly, I believe, we shall be too late. 'Twould be best, I think, if our little elf's name were not mixed up in the story."

Cullen bit his lip. "That might be possible. Brosca already told Dworkin to keep quiet about the trick." He looked at the Dalish. "This is a secret matter,"

The elder of the two Dalish elves shrugged. "As you wish, Warden. We are pleased to find the *asha* alive."

"What trick?" Adaia asked, realizing that her legs hurt. She bent down to rub them, but her boots were in the way. It would be wonderful to take them off and soak her feet.

Brosca said, "Dworkin figured it out right away when he discovered that Arl Bryland never called for him. When you weren't in the workshop and he saw there had been a struggle, he came to us. And here we are. Let's go find those bastards. How many darkspawn?"

"I didn't stay to count them. Maybe eight? Nine? A big hurlock and at least two or three archers."



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"We should go and check on it. Try to clear them out." Cullen thought a little more, and asked the Dalish, "Could one of you help her back to the Tower? And then tell Master Dworkin she's all right?"

"I can," said one. "And then I shall follow you to find the darkspawn."



The camp was shocked to hear of the death of Bann Vaughan and his boon companions, Lords Braden and Jonaley. Leonas Bryland was particularly stunned by the loss. He had not liked Vaughan, and he had liked him even less as he had come to know him better, here in Ostagar; but Vaughan had been his prospective son-in-law, and Habren had *fancied* him. It was a setback, certainly. At least the Wardens had tracked down and destroyed the band of darkspawn stragglers that had killed the young noblemen.

Why they were out in the Wilds in the first place was even more problematic. Their clothes reeked of wine. Why would they go somewhere so remote and perilous, when they could get as drunk as they pleased right in camp? Whispers raged that the dead men had been up to some sort of depraved orgy, "all *three* of them, you see, and that was why they had needed *privacy*."

Bryland sighed deeply, disgusted by the rumors; and prepared quill and ink to write a letter that would sadly disappoint his daughter.



The Wardens and their allies discussed it thoroughly when Alistair's party returned to Ostagar three days later. It was as exciting as finding the source of the darkspawn, as exciting as Carver's new status as a bonafide Warden. His Joining had gone well, and he had now learned what he could and could not talk about in public.

Carver was glad that Adaia was safe, of course, but was much more interested in his own situation. Yes, the dreams were horrible and the darkspawn blood tasted worse than anything in the world, but he was a Warden now, and he *belonged*. He had done something that Adam had never even dreamed of.

"So, how about it?" he asked Alistair eagerly. "Could I go home for a day or two and talk to my family? Can I wear your Warden tabard, Alistair? I wish somebody would talk to them, and make them see that it's mad to run away."

"Bronwyn's really good at talking people into things," Alistair considered, "but she's not here. Of course, a bard might be able to help..."

Everyone's eyes turned to Leliana. She gave Carver a warm smile. "I would be happy to go with you, Carver, but I can promise nothing. If your mother is homesick for her childhood home, that is not something to be reasoned away."

"Just try," Carver pleaded. "And it would be great to have you along." Maybe his mother would think he and Leliana were... well... Leliana was *gorgeous*. And refined. Even Adam would be impressed by Leliana. "Anyway, I should get them

some presents before we go. I'll go see the quartermaster right away. Maybe you could come with me and help me pick out something? Could we leave in the morning?"

"Of course. It will be very interesting, going to Lothering again. We shall call on your family and then on the Revered Mother."

"Before you go anywhere, Carver," Alistair said, "We have to be united about Adaia's situation. We're not telling anybody what we know about Vaughan's death, except for Bronwyn. She needs to know."

No one disagreed with that. Carver nodded, impatient to be at his shopping. Leliana patted his hand.

Adaia asked, uncertain, "She won't be mad at me, will she?"

"Course not!" Brosca said stoutly. "She'll be glad you're such a good runner. Bastard had it coming."

Sten could not hide his contempt for human inheritance customs. "The man was unfit for command, and has been removed by his own stupidity. That is as it should be."

Oghren chuckled, "Aye. No one here is going to talk. Blighter was asking for it, just like Brosca says."

"What should I get my mother and sister?" Carver asked Leliana. "I suppose I should get them something practical for a journey, but I don't want to encourage them to go. And I don't want to get them something that they can't take with them, in case they do go."

"Jewelry is practical in its own way," Leliana advised. "If

your funds do not run to gold, silver is always pretty. In a crisis it can be used as money. It is portable, so it can be taken anywhere, or simply worn at home."

They were not the only ones seeking out the quartermaster. A group of Dalish elves were there, dickering with the man. The quartermaster had little experience dealing with elves as customers, other than the odd Warden or two. If he made himself think of these elves as more Wardens, it was not so uncomfortable.

Leliana smiled brightly at the pretty elf woman gazing dreamily at some blue linen, and then realized that this was their leader.

"Keeper Merrill. Good day to you. It's pretty, isn't it?" she asked, pointing at the cloth. "Blue is my favorite color."

"I love blue," Merrill agreed. "All sorts of blue. No," she said to the quartermaster. "I'm not going to buy it. I just want to look at it. Unless someone else wants to buy it, and then it won't be here anymore. That's the point, I suppose. Oh, well. Perhaps I shall, after all. I can hang it from the ceiling of my aravel and it will look like a blue sky..."

"A charming idea," Leliana approved. "Carver, that silver bracelet is nice. Perhaps for your sister...?"

Merrill turned to Leliana, and, apropos of nothing, asked, "Do you think we'll win?"

Nonplussed, Leliana hesitated. "Win? Against the darkspawn?" She paused, and then said firmly. "Yes. We shall win. Sooner or later, the Blights are always overcome. We

shall defeat the darkspawn, just as our ancestors did; for good always triumphs over evil."

"That's very comforting," Merrill considered. "Very comforting, indeed. The darkspawn are certainly evil. The question, as I see it, is: are we good?" She gathered the lengths of sky-blue linen to her shallow bosom. "Oh, yes, thank you, Quartermaster. I get coins back? That's very nice." She gazed past Leliana's head, her smooth brow contracting minutely. "Oh, Creators..."

"Keeper Merrill!" A young knight bowed to her, "The King requests the honor of your presence in his tent!"

"That's very kind of him. He has nice wine." She drifted away in the direction of the royal enclave.

Carver and Leliana caught each other's eye. The Dalish, however, were unperturbed. "The Keeper is well able to protect herself," said one. "The shemlen king will get a surprise if he is overbold."

Of course, Bann Vaughan's death was not soon forgotten, and there were those who were capable of putting facts together. Alistair was called to Loghain's quarters the following morning, after the departure of Carver and Leliana, and to his surprise found himself alone, facing the Teyrn.

"What do you know about the death of Bann Vaughan?"

"I'm not sure what you mean, my lord," Alistair said cautiously, falling back on his childhood ploy of looking innocent and stupid.



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That ploy was useless with Loghain, who had raised Anora. "Hmm. Let's see: a nobleman and his friends are found dead by the Wardens. They were up in the hills, drinking wine, not even wearing *armor*. There is something missing from this picture, don't you think?"

Alistair's face hardened. "The darkspawn killed Vaughan and his friends, not the Wardens."

"I'm not accusing them of killing Vaughan. It's clear that something else was involved. Where's that elf girl? Shall I have her join us?"

"No!" Alistair said sharply. "She's suffered enough!" He glared at Loghain, made brave by indignation. "There's no need to drag her into this. I suppose people would accuse her of forcing Vaughan's friends to sneak up on her when she was alone in the workshop, and making them attack her and kidnap her against her will, and tying her to the back of a horse, and cruelly ordering them to take her up to the hills so they could do what they liked. Or they'd blame her for not saving Vaughan's life when the darkspawn attacked, and for running away instead." He took a breath, hot and flushed.

Loghain look at the boy calmly. He really was terribly easy to manipulate. He might not defend himself, but he would strike back when his friends were attacked, or his mother was insulted.

"That's what I needed to know. Was the girl badly injured?"

Grudgingly, embarrassed that Loghain had so easily got him to spill everything, Alistair said, "Not so she couldn't run.



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They hadn't got far with her when the darkspawn showed up."

"I see. Keep her out of the public eye, won't you?"

"Er... sure. Right."

"Good. Enough of that. We have work to do." He spread out the map of Ostagar and the Wilds, and the two men were soon engrossed in planning.



ADAIA (NÉE MELIAN) TABRIS

CHAPTER 15

QUEEN OF SCHEMES, QUEEN OF SWORDS

OWAN WONDERED IF HE
WOULD HAVE HAD BETTER LUCK
IN THE MAGES' LIBRARY AT THE

CIRCLE TOWER. The royal library had a number of books about Nevarra, but they were mostly political histories. He might learn quite a bit about the powerful Pentaghast clan, but not about how they had actually killed dragons.

That was how the Pentaghasts had made their vast fortune: by leading campaigns, Jowan read, against the dragons. While the campaign rhetoric was rich with fulminations against the dangers of the creatures posed, it appeared the hunters were doing it mostly for gold and glory. Dragonbone was immensely valuable, and was recycled and reprocessed from owner to owner, generation to generation. Later references in the book seemed to indicate that dragons had once again become a threat along the Orlesian-Nevarran border, and no one seemed to be having much luck against them.

Were dragons making a resurgence? It would certainly

seem so. The Divine had named their own age the "Dragon" due to an unexpected sighting after a long period in which dragons had been thought extinct. Jowan pondered the matter, sitting in the pleasantly quiet room, dust motes dancing in the light slanting down from high windows. The place reminded him a little of the Circle, but was better appointed and better lit. The tables were not defaced with hundreds of years of graffiti carved into them, and Jowan occupied a comfortable chair, rather than a hard, wobbly bench. The librarian was polite and helpful to the Warden, and had heaped a stack of books about Nevarra at Jowan's elbow.

Maybe he should read more about the border issue. The Nevarrans and Orlesians were at odds, and had been for hundreds of years. In fact, you could almost say that Orlais had invaded Ferelden in order to strengthen itself against Nevarran encroachment on its northern borders. The Bannorn was famously fertile country, and the Orlesians had wanted the Fereldan breadbasket to support their troops. Over the past few hundred years, the Nevarrans had built quite a coalition in the western Marches. Everyone there hated the Orlesians. According to this book, the Nevarrans had recently taken yet another city, Perendale, from the Orlesians. Jowan checked the date of publication. Well, 'recently' meant eight years ago.

At any rate, something was up with the dragons. Jowan flipped through the pages to the later chapters, looking for anything referring to them. Yes. Something was definitely

up. It looked like there had been attacks in the countryside both in Nevarra and in Orlais, and attempts to put the dragons down had met with disaster. Did the Queen know about this? Was this why the Orlesians had made peace with Fereldan after the Rebellion was successful? Maybe between the Nevarrans and the dragons, not even wealthy Orlais could manage yet another war.

Flemeth had not been a real dragon, of course: just a shape-shifting mage. And yet... he fidgeted in the polished chair, biting his lip. Shape-shifters supposedly reverted to their true shape after death. Flemeth had not. A huge dragon corpse had sprawled out on the little hill where Flemeth died. Teyrn Loghain was having it methodically stripped of everything useful: bone, scales, hide — especially the precious wing hide — tendons, fire glands — everything, really. It was gruesome, considering that it had once been a woman, but Teyrn Loghain was a ruthless man. And a thrifty one. Fresh dragonbone was very nearly priceless. Why had Flemeth not reverted to human form? It was a puzzlement.

He picked up another book, thinking it over. The word “campaign” struck him. Calling the efforts of the dragon hunters “campaigns” made it sound like there were significant forces involved. More than fifty people had taken part in the killing of Flemeth, and that had not felt like too many. A lot of them had been archers, and their arrows did not seem to have done a great deal of good, but

people were already discussing new poisons and exploding arrowheads. If there had been darkspawn there, or — Maker save them! — another dragon on the scene, they would have been in serious trouble. And not many people would jump on a dragon’s back, unlike Bronwyn Cousland, who would, and had.

The mages had done much better than the archers. Jowan smiled faintly, feeling pride in the accomplishment. He suspected that enough mages, working together, might be able to bring down a dragon on their own. But it would take a lot of mages, and the Chantry did not like the idea of mages associating in large numbers, especially when curses were being cast. The College of Magi occasionally met in Cumberland. These conferences were attended by only Chantry-approved, elderly enchanters, and at that, they were heavily policed by Templars. Only a Blight could have produced the mob of battlemages down at Ostagar. Jowan wondered how many would find a way to escape the Templars and live as apostates, when the Blight was over and won.

Every single one of them, he hoped fiercely.

He had been crazy and reckless, but escaping the Circle had been the right thing to do. Beyond all expectations, he still had Tara, his best and oldest friend. Anders was treating him decently, as long the issue of Blood Magic was never mentioned. Morrigan was no more scornful of Jowan than she was of nearly everyone else. He had been fantastically lucky that Bronwyn had allowed him to join

the Wardens. And she never watched him, or made him feel like a monster. The Wardens, henceforth, would be his home. And the Warden compound was hands down the best home he had ever known.

He skimmed through the book in his hands. *War with Orlais...mighty Pentaghast clan...a family built on dragon-bone'...the deeds of King Tylus...* Nothing new here. Heaps of genealogical charts, and capsule biographies of the kings and queens. He yawned, and picked up the next volume.

Tara, Danith, and Zevran made it to the Alienage without difficulty. A few people looked at them askance, but the guards recognized the Grey Warden insignia. Others on the street simply looked away in disgust, muttering that "knife ears should be locked up with their own kind." The walk was not a long one, along the broad King's Way. The tall, imposing homes of the wealthy and noble lined the route. Tara and Zevran amused themselves by speculating on the people who owned them, and debating which one would be the nicest to live in. Danith shuddered at the thought of living anywhere in this city on a permanent basis.

The guard at the Alienage gate gave them a hard stare, but let them pass. It offended his sensibilities to see armed elves without arresting them, but two of them were wearing those griffon tabards.

"Grey Wardens, eh? They take all sorts," he grunted. "Get on with you, then."

Tara smiled charmingly at him.

They passed through, and immediately the stink of the city, already strong, nearly knocked them down. There could not have been a greater contrast to the mansions they had passed. Here, a confusion of random boards were discovered to be houses, so precariously assembled that it seemed that they might collapse at any moment. There was no logic or order to the place: walls poked out at crazy angles, roofs rose and slumped away.

"Well," Tara sighed, "I knew that elves were poor. I suppose I didn't quite understand what that really meant. It's better than Dust Town, Danith. The casteless among the dwarves don't even have the sun and the sky!"

"I thank the Creators that I have never seen that place," Danith said briefly, "though I am told that I shall, someday. It is difficult to conceive of anything more foul than this!"

"Within their own houses, however humble," Zevran countered her, "they are free. I think that is better than to be a slave, in however luxurious a Palace — or whorehouse," he muttered to himself.

Danith stalked over to a rancid pile of offal cast carelessly under a window. "It is not a matter of only two choices," she said coldly. "Freedom is always best, even the freedom to starve and die, but must they live like *this*? Have they no dignity? No pride?"

"That I cannot tell you, my halla," Zevran smiled. "I know even less of Alienages than I do of the forest."



DENERIM: THE ALIENAGE



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A gust of wind stirred the rubbish in a lazy whirlwind. It died away, and the alley was silent.

"Where is everyone?" wondered Tara. "I thought the Alienage was supposed to be crowded."

Zevran frowned. He had been wondering the same thing. This place was wrong. He murmured, "The people are inside. They are watching us. I feel their gaze. We are a frightening trio, are we not?"

Danith pushed on, scowling. Elves lived here? It seemed impossible that anything could live in this place, but no, behind one of the hovels she caught the glimpse of something green – a little vegetable patch, struggling to grow amidst the dismal shadows.

The alley meandered on, grey and rotting. Beyond a projecting wall, it widened, and they turned the corner.

"Oh!" Danith cried out, involuntarily.

It spread its luxuriant boughs before her: tall, majestic, dark-green and rooted deep in the earth. It was a Vhenadahl, the Tree of the People. It looked down on this filthy place, proclaiming that yes, elves lived here, however sad and degraded. Danith felt near to weeping.

"That's a beautiful tree," Tara observed innocently. "It's the biggest tree we've seen in all Denerim. At least they have that!"

"Yes," Danith repeated dully, "at least they have that..."

Zevran whispered the lore of the vhenadahl to Tara, or as much as he knew. Tara nodded thoughtfully. She wondered if she had been right to come here. Danith was so upset by it all...

"Pssst!" Someone hissed at them from the shadows. "Pssst!" Danith frowned, peering closer. Zevran grinned. Tara said, "Hello, little girl!"

A pretty, dirty child of eight or nine peeked shyly at them. "You're going to get in trouble! You need to hide!"

Zevran and Danith glanced about them sharply. Tara asked, "Why? Why are we in trouble?"

"Don't you know anything?" The little girl pointed to a parchment nailed to a wall. "I can't read, but that says that elves can't carry weapons – especially swords. If the guards catch you, they can kill you right there and then!"

Zevran smiled winningly. "I see no guards. I see no one but ourselves. Where are the elves?"

"Mostly gone," the child told him frankly. "Gone away to find work. Valendrian and Shianni think they're silly."

"And you have not gone – because you are too young to work?" wondered Zevran.

"No. I can't go," the child said, "because I'm waiting for Mother. She's hasn't come back from Highever yet."

"What do you mean?" Danith asked sternly.

"Mother is Lady Landra's lady-in-waiting. Lady Landra is very generous, and gave Mother a beautiful dress to wear when she attends her. Mother put it on so I could see her in it. Only... Lady Landra doesn't like her ladies to have children, so Mother sent me to stay with relatives in Denerim. She used to send money, but I haven't heard from her in the longest time. But she's coming back: I know she is."

Tara whispered, "Maybe Bronwyn knows this Lady Landra." Danith nodded, eyes fixed on the beautiful little child. How could elves neglect their own like this?

"We shall ask her. Where do you sleep, child?"

"The hahren lets me sleep at his house, now that the orphanage is empty. I have my own corner!" she said proudly.

"You have a *hahren*?" Danith asked, absolutely stunned. How could a proper hahren allow... all *this*?

"Yes," the child told them, glad to grant ignorant grown-ups her important knowledge. "Valendrian is the hahren. He's very nice. He understands about waiting for Mother."

"I would speak with this 'hahren' Valendrian," Danith declared, very grim.

"What is your name, little beauty?" Zevran asked the child.

"Amethyne. My mother is Iona. Have you seen her anywhere?"

"Alas, no," Zevran replied. "Let us introduce ourselves, and then visit your hahren. I am Zevran, this is Tara, and this is Danith of the Dalish. Tara and Danith are Grey Wardens, and I suspect your hahren would indeed like to talk to us, since we can give him news of Melian Tabris."

"He'll be upset to see you carrying weapons. He doesn't like it when elves get hurt, and you'll get hurt if the shems catch you."

"We're Grey Wardens." Tara smiled at her. "Do you see our special clothes? That means we're allowed. Let's go see Valendrian now."

The child slipped out of the shadows and took Tara by the hand. "All right, but if the shems come, I'm going to

hide. I'm good at hiding. It doesn't say anything about Grey Wardens in the signs."

The signs were indeed posted at regular intervals and printed in black block letters. "*Elves found with swords will die upon them.*"

Danith ripped one down and trampled it underfoot as they followed the child.

Tara went on with her gentle questioning. She was used to talking to the little apprentices of Circle, and realized that she had missed being around children. "When you're mother left for Highever, did she leave you with the... hahren?" She whispered to Danith, "What's a hahren?"

"An elder of the people. One who is considered...." She forced out the word as if it tasted sour. "wise."

Amethyne was already answering, "No. I stayed with Maranni and Lodor, but when they left to find work, the hahren said I couldn't go, because I had to wait for Mother. So then I went to the orphanage, and that was nice because I had lots of friends; but one night big shems came, and they took everyone – grownups and children and all. I hid under my bed and made myself as small as I could. In the morning, I was the only one left. That's when the hahren took me to his house. We took my bed from the orphanage and put it in my special corner, and I've been there ever since." She pointed. "There's the house!"

It was in a place where the alley bent and widened, and was just opposite the great and shady vhenadahl.

"Ha!" laughed Zevran. "The privileges of leadership. The hahren has the only pleasant view in the Alienage!"

Danith put a gentle hand on the bark of the vhenadahl, thinking back on the history of the elves, grieving that it had come to this for so many of their people. With a frown, she followed Tara and Zevran to the house of Valendrian.

The child opened the door of the humble dwelling without ceremony and called out, "Hahren! There are people to see you!"

He looked like a proper elf to Danith's eyes, though he wore the rough clothes of poor shemlens: his eyes wise and filled with the knowledge of the things that many years bring. The lined face brightened with pleasure at the sight of new elves for him to meet.

"You are most welcome!" the elderly elf said in a mild, low voice, worn by years of smoothing over the troubles of life in the Alienage. "I see that one of you at least is a cousin from the Dalish clans. And..." he looked again at Danith and Tara's tabards. "You... are Grey Wardens?" he asked, in awe. "That is a noble thing. May I know your names?"

With cool reserve, Danith said, "*Andaran antish'an*, hahren. I am Danith Mahariel of the clan of Marethari, now a Grey Warden."

"You are most welcome."

Zevran nodded with formal grace. "Zevran Aranai, late of Antiva. I am not a Grey Warden, but I have the honor to fight beside them." The hahren studied the handsome young elf, his fine armor and weapons, and his air of

assurance with some perplexity. Perhaps things were very different in Antiva, but this young man was not much like any elf Valendrian had ever met.

"But *I'm* a Grey Warden!" Tara laughed. "Tara Surana, formerly of the Fereldan Circle."

"Surana!" Valendrian repeated in surprise. He thought a moment. "... Tara... Surana? You have come home, child. I know your parents. They grieved deeply the day the Templars came to take you away. How happy they would be to know you are alive."

Tara's face fell. "Are they dead? I'm sorry, but I remember almost nothing. I was told I came from the Denerim Alienage, but I was just four years old when I went to the Circle, and that's pretty much all I remember."

"Your parents were not dead when they left to find work. That was two... no... three months ago. Tirian and Layli Surana, with their daughter Nessa."

Tara was amazed. "I have a sister? I have parents? That's so... wonderful! Tell me about them."

"They are good people. Tirian is a tireless worker, and Layli is a kind woman and a wonderful cook."

Zevran laughed, "That does not seem to have been passed down, alas."

"Oh, you!" She turned eagerly to Valendrian. "Tell me more please. Does Nessa look like me?"

"Your hair is darker, but there is a family resemblance. But come, let me offer you refreshment, and we shall talk in comfort."

He led them to a simple but clean table, and while they seated themselves, he bustled around, with Amethyne's eager help. It did not take the him long to bring them steaming tea in his best earthenware cups. It was flavored with elfroot leaves, and with it he served crisp sweet biscuits: the kind that would keep well, so he would always have something to offer guests.

He sat with them, with a weary old man's sigh but a ready smile. "So Tara Surana has returned home, bringing friends. This is a happy day. We must share this news with the people of the Alienage!"

Tara smiled back. He reminded her of some of the elven Senior Enchanters at the Circle.

Valendrian gestured at them to go ahead and eat. He said, still full of wonder, "And now you are a Grey Warden. Everyone will be proud to hear it. I knew Duncan. He came here from time to time, seeking out likely youths and maidens."

"It would be difficult to do any recruiting today," Zevran remarked. "There are fewer people of the Alienage than I expected."

"It is true. Word came of well-paying work to the north. It was done so secretly that I spoke against it. In my experience, when a thing seems too good to be true, it really is. Many were too desperate for to be reasoned with, however, and they listened to the humans. I told them they would do better to go south and serve the army, but they feared the darkspawn."

"Darkspawn are certainly something for a reasonable

person to fear," Tara said easily, "but we have other news for you. Melian Tabris is with the Wardens in Ostagar. She uses the name Adaia, but she told us her real name."

Valendrian's eyes lit. "Melian is alive? That is wonderful news. I must tell her father, Cyrion. I must tell Shianni..."

"They have not gone after this 'well-paying work in the North?'" asked Zevran.

Valendrian shook his head. "Cyrion would not go while there was hope he would hear the fate of Melian. Shianni would not go, because Bann Vaughan had arranged for this mysterious 'work.' She fears anything to do with the man, and in this I believe she is right. At least the Bann is far away now, but —" His eyes widened in distress.

"Yes," Tara told him. "He saw Adaia — I mean Melian. He saw her and was very angry, and insisted that she be rendered to him for what he calls justice. Our commander, however, defied him, telling him that Grey Wardens were beyond his reach. There was a quarrel, which Teyrn Loghain seems to have resolved on the surface. Our commander ordered the Wardens in Ostagar never to leave Melian unescorted. We take care of our own."

"As should all elves everywhere," Valendrian agreed, very pleased with his visitors.

Danith was not so pleased. She rose and paced back and forth, peering about the little house. Simplicity she could not disparage. This house at least was clean, though the furnishings were poor and plain. She said, "Words are all very well,

but it does not seem that elves are caring for one another *here!*" She whirled on Valendrian, scowling. "Why is there refuse in the streets? Even a savage shemlen disposes of his waste!"

Tara blushed for her friend and for the hurt look on Valendrian's face. The old man did not raise his voice, but spoke gently, as if to a child.

"Because it not the first, the tenth, nor the twentieth day of the month. Those are the days the contracted city crews come to haul away waste and nightsoil. Only the city crews, whose contract is held by the Bann of the Alienage, are permitted to haul and dispose of trash, and to carry nightsoil from the privies. It is sold as fertilizer to farmers outside the city, and a portion of the proceeds goes to the Bann. There are heavy penalties if an elf is caught dumping trash, either within the city or into the sea. A small amount of waste is used to fertilize our own gardens, but it must be done discreetly, lest the Bann's men destroy the plants as punishment."

Danith's eyes blazed, and she struck against the wall with her fist.

"That is monstrous!"

Valendrian gazed at her with compassion, having a lifetime of experience with angry young elves railing against the ways of the world.

"It seems unreasonable," Zevran agreed, smiling wryly, "for an elf to be punished for putting his own shit on his own garden. However, noblemen are not widely known for their reason."

"That is very true," said Valendrian, pleased to see that the young man was so level-headed. "However, it would be wrong to describe all shems – even all noblemen – as greedy and irrational. There are all kinds among them, as there are among elves."

"Like Bronwyn, our commander," Tara put in eagerly. "She's very fair and very generous with all us, whether human, dwarf, or elf. And she's noble. So is her brother, Teyrn Cousland. He's the one who stepped in to protect Melian. Afterwards we all agreed that Melian needed to get out of Denerim, since the Alienage was locked fast and we couldn't get her back in."

Valendrian gave her a nod. "I am glad Melian is with friends, no matter what their race. Amethyne," he called the little girl to him. "Do you know the house of Cyrion Tabris?"

A quick nod.

"Then," said the old man, "go to him and tell him to come at once. We have good news of his daughter. If Shi-anni is there, bring her, too."

"Are you going to tell them to hide their swords?" Amethyne asked the hahren. "I warned them they'd get in trouble."

"No one is going to bother Grey Wardens," the old man assured her. "Now off you go to Cyrion."

When the child had gone, Valendrian remarked, "That is something of a falsehood. Many may not recognize your tabards, and there are those some who will always wish to bother an elf. However, the world is what it is." He smiled

slowly. "Before Cyrion arrives, Tara, it may interest you to know that you and Melian Tabris are second cousins. Cyrion and your mother are first cousins. Shianni is also your second cousin. I can show you the records if you are interested."

"Oh, yes!" she said eagerly. "I'd love to know about my relatives! I've never had any before..."

"In the Alienage," Valendrian smiled ruefully, "we may lack many things, but we never lack family."

"Some do," Danith put in. "That child – Amethyne – is her mother dead?"

"I do not know," Valendrian admitted. "We heard of the terrible bloodshed at Highever, but no word has come of Iona, or from anyone in the Alienage, for that matter. I have attempted to get word to friends there, with no success. I think it likely that she was killed, but while any hope remained, I could not permit the child to be taken to an unknown fate by Bann Vaughan's men."

"What about the children being taken from the orphanage?" Tara asked. "Why would they take them?"

Valendrian looked at her gravely. "I believe it is obvious that it would be for no good purpose. Amethyne was able to hide. The rest of the children and their caregivers were not so fortunate. It was done quietly, under cover of night. We did not even know they were gone until Cyrion went there the following day to perform some repair work, and found the place abandoned, but for that one child."

There was a bustle at the door, and a young woman

called. "Hahren?"

Valendrian rose to lead his visitors in. "Cyrion... Shianni... we have wonderful news. Melian is alive and well."

"Tell me everything," begged Cyrion, looking like a drowning man offered a rope to cling to.

Brief introductions were made, and as Cyrion was delighted to hear that Tara was close kin, she became the spokeswoman. She told them Melian's story from the night the girl had been trapped outside the Alienage.

" – So she's with us, and working at Ostagar, and she would have sent her love, but we didn't know until we were already on the road that we would have to make a stop in Denerim."

The red-haired cousin, Shianni, was openly crying.

"I thought I'd screwed up again, and got her captured – me going off to try to talk sense to Elva and those other idiots."

"She was captured," Tara told her, "but Bronwyn and Teyrn Fergus intervened. What with everything, since we couldn't get her back into the Alienage, it was best for her to leave Denerim with us. Vaughan is down in Ostagar now, and he tried to have her arrested, but Bronwyn wasn't having it. She told Teyrn Loghain that Adaia – sorry, Melian – was a Grey Warden recruit and nobody could touch her. And she didn't care what Vaughan said she'd done! Melian stays with us in the Grey Warden quarters: her cot is right next to mine. Bronwyn ordered that one of us walk her back and forth to her job at the workshop. So she's fine. She misses her family, of course, but she's fine."

Cyrlion and Shianni wanted every detail of Adaia's appearance, health, diet, and activities. They were interested in Tara, too; though her life in the Circle was as mysterious to them as if she had been living on the moon since she was taken away.

"Who is this Bronwyn you keep talking about?" asked Shianni.

Tara stared at her. "She's the Warden-Commander. She used to be Lady Bronwyn Cousland. She's the sister of the Teyrn of Highever. She's great. She saved my life. You haven't heard of the Girl Warden?"

"The Girl Warden?" Shianni scoffed. "That's just a story!"

Valendrian smiled slightly, and sighed.

"My dear young lady," Zevran said suavely, "I assure you that the Girl Warden is quite real, and in Denerim as we speak."

Shianni stared open-mouthed at Zevran, undone by the accent, the looks, and being called a "dear young lady." Valendrian wondered if the handsome stranger was married. While the hahren was not sure how well being an elven warrior paid, the young man certainly had the appearance of one able to support a wife and family.

Tara told them more. "Danith here is teaching Melian – and me, too – all about Dalish customs and elven language. It's so exciting being among elves from other backgrounds. We're all learning so much!"

Shianni stared even more, and blurted, "but the Dalish –" She was about to say "are a story!" Clearly, things that

she thought only made-up were true. Which meant that things that she had been sure of were false. It was very confusing. "I like your tattoos," she finally said to Danith. "Is it true you live in the woods and eat raw meat?"

Danith narrowed her eyes. "Live in the woods? Yes. Eat raw meat? No. Well – only when absolutely necessary."

"But how do you cook if you don't have any houses or pots and pans or anything?"

With more patience than she knew she possessed, Danith briefly explained about aravels, the landships of the Dalish, and how the Dalish took pride in living simply.

Shianni tried to take it all in, overwhelmed at the idea of a life on the move, without the security of four walls and a roof: without the protection of the Alienage gates.

"But... aren't you *afraid*?" she finally asked.

Danith shot back, "Aren't you? You live surrounded by and under the power of hostile shemlens. Every hand is against you. Shemlen nobles harm you as they please. You have no Keeper to lead you, for the shemlen priests take care to have them removed from among you."

"A Keeper?" wondered Shianni. "What's a Keeper?"

Zevran almost spoke, but Danith answered ruthlessly, pointing to Tara, "There is the one who should be your Keeper, but who was stolen from you. She – or one of more years, who would be training her, just as our Keeper Marethari is training Merrill."

"But she's a *mage*!" Shianni gasped. "You live with mages?"

I mean —" she backtracked, with a little apologetic smile at Tara. "You seem really nice and all, cousin, but everybody knows that mages are dangerous!"

"Shianni," Valendrian said gently, "your cousin is a Grey Warden. It is allowed for her to travel freely. She has had years of training at the Circle, and knows how to use her magic wisely."

Tara wished that Knight-Commander Greagoir could hear this hahren's glowing assessment of her qualifications and abilities. She nearly burst out in laughter, imagining the sober Templar's head — exploding.

Sighing happily to herself, she said, "Shianni, there are all sorts of different ways for mages to be trained. The Dalish train their own without the Circle, and they seem quite expert to me. The Circle exists mainly so shemlen Templars can bully and oppress mages. It's a pretty awful place. Being recruited for the Grey Wardens was the best thing that ever happened to me." She thought more about what Danith had said.

"Danith, I hadn't thought about that. It's true, though. Keepers help maintain the elven clans' history, and they lead and protect them. Taking children with magic away from the Alienage — and training people to be afraid of it — is just one more way to control us. I'm trying to imagine being a Keeper. That's too much responsibility for me!"

"Now, perhaps," Danith allowed. "But I suspect you are already a different girl than the one who was plucked

from the shemlens' Tower. Who knows what you shall be, when you come into your own?"

Shianni was still wrestling with the frightening idea of mages living among normal people. "The Chantry says they keep the mages at the Circle for their own good..."

Danith clucked her tongue in annoyance. "How closely my city kin clasp the chains that bind them!"

Valendrian spoke softly. "The last thing elves should do is quarrel among ourselves. Surely we have enemies enough without that!"

Danith huffed, but did not disagree. More tea was poured, and more biscuits handed round. Until they departed, she took no more part in the conversation, but thought a great deal about the child Amethyne, and how she might save her from this dreadful place.

Bronwyn was reading correspondence in the study when the trio of elves returned.

"I have cousins!" Tara told her, bouncing a little, eyes bright. "I have a mother and a father, and a *sister!* Hahren Valendrian knew who I was!"

Bronwyn set aside the letter from Starkhaven and gave Tara her full attention. "You met your family! How wonderful! I hope they are well."

"Actually," Tara confessed, "my family went north with those work crews. But I found out that Adaia and I are second cousins. The hahren showed me his book where

he records all the marriages and births. And I was there! Tara Surana! Apparently 'Surana' is a common family name. And my parents didn't want me to go to the Circle! They wanted to keep me, mage or not! The Templars came and took me by force!"

"I'm glad you found the elves so welcoming," Bronwyn said.

"Very welcoming," laughed Zevran. "If we had stayed much longer, the hahren would have arranged marriages for all of us – especially me."

"Well," Bronwyn pointed out, "you *are* quite the catch."

"Ah, but I have already been caught by the Wardens, and so am ineligible."

Danith snorted. "It was very dirty," she said, "and the people are oppressed and pitifully ignorant. The hahren does what he can with nothing. He is a well-meaning man, however," she allowed.

"How were *your* cousins?" Tara asked Bronwyn, conscientiously changing the subject.

Bronwyn shook her head. "It was all very... interesting. I had not really met the two young boys before. They seem nice young lads. Oh – I invited them to join us for their midday meal tomorrow. They are very excited about meeting more Wardens. One of them has a puppy, and will be bringing it with him."

Scout glanced up at the elves, panting happily.

Danith rolled her eyes. Tara was more concerned about making a good impression.

"Do we need to dress up?"

"Only in all the armor and weapons you have. I think the boys would like that best." Her smile faded. "Zevran, you and I need to conclude matters with our prisoner before I go to see the Queen."

"I am with you in this as in all things, Queen of Swords," Zevran assured her gallantly.

"Ooo, Zevran!" Tara approved. "Good one!"

"Commander," Danith said formally, "I realize that you are busy at the moment, but when you are at leisure, I wish to speak to you about some matters that came to our attention when we visited the Alienage today."

"Of course," Bronwyn agreed, rather puzzled. "I am dining with the Queen, but I should be quite free afterward."

"That is well." Danith's face shut down.

Tara whispered. "She was upset. And so was I. We'll tell you later!"

Bronwyn's curiosity was aroused, and she would have preferred to remain and hear what the elves had to say. However, the afternoon was drawing to a close, and with Zevran here, she could no longer delay the inevitable. She had a spy to execute and a Queen to visit, and neither could wait any longer.

"It's time. Scout, stay with Tara."

Within minutes, Bronwyn and Zevran were climbing the winding staircase to the room where Erlina was spending her last moments.

Zevran asked, "May I speak to her alone first?"

Bronwyn shrugged. "If you think it worth your time."

Astrid was lounging comfortably in a chair outside the door, entertaining herself with a book of ancient ballads. On the floor beside her was a tray bearing the remains of a hearty snack.

"There you are!" Astrid greeted them. She jerked her head at the door. "I gave her a sandwich and a cup of cider about an hour ago. I sat in the room and took the cup and plate back when she was done. So she's had her last meal. It was a pretty good sandwich." Since she had no personal quarrel with the elf, she saw no reason not to give her decent treatment. On the other hand, regicides deserved to die.

"Thank you," Bronwyn said. "Then that is something we need not bother with, though we might want to use the cup again."

Astrid unlocked the room, and Zevran slipped in.

"Do you trust him?" Astrid asked quietly. "Sleeping potions are tricky things. Sometimes they don't work exactly the way they're supposed to."

"That had crossed my mind," Bronwyn said. "I've planned to take additional steps on my own."

"Good," Astrid nodded, pleased that the Commander was such a sensible person.

After a few moments, Zevran was back. "She wanted to keep me talking, but she really had nothing more to say."

"Really?" Bronwyn asked. "A few more questions occurred to me. There is time for a little conversation before

we report to the Queen."

She pushed the door open, and loomed over the elf woman. Erlina sat on the edge of the narrow cot, her eyes fixed on the floor. She barely glanced up to acknowledge Bronwyn's presence.

"I would like to speak to the Queen," she whispered. "To apologize."

"She does not wish to see you," Bronwyn returned crisply. "She does not wish to hear your name ever again. If it comforts you, know that you have succeeded in causing her great harm and pain. However, my expert Healer feels there is nothing wrong with her that he cannot deal with, given time."

A lie, but Bronwyn was in no mood to allow Erlina the cruel triumph of knowing that she had shortened the Queen's life and ruined her health. It was far more satisfactory to let the treacherous maid believe herself a failure. Bronwyn leaned against the wall, and brought up something had puzzled her.

"You know, the more I considered your plan, the more full of flaws it seemed to me. How exactly did you plan on making Teyrn Loghain submit to the King's marriage to the Empress, and to our new Orlesian overlords? He commands the army, after all."

Erlina kept her face immobile. No one knew about the agents sent to Ostagar. This was the one thing she would keep back. It was the one thing she could cherish in the

wreck of her plans and the loss of her life.

Instead, she said, "Teyrn Loghain is only a jumped-up peasant. He is not the King. In the end, the Empress trusted in the loyalty of the Fereldan people to the house of Calenhad. The King would have had the support of the Chantry. And with the death of the Queen, the Teyrn would have had no standing had the King chosen to remove him from command. There are others who would obey, even if Loghain would not. If the Queen died, Loghain would have come to Denerim. He would have been arrested and confined. Later, he would have died of 'grief.'"

Bronwyn was silent, considering this. Erlina held her breath, hoping that the Warden would believe the lie. It was plausible: very plausible. It was just the sort of thing that Cailan would do. Indeed, such a plan had even been proposed to the King some time ago. Probably he believed that it was what would happen eventually.

There was a long silence. Erlina glanced up at the Warden, who was simply looking at her. Frowning. Erlina's heart beat a little faster. She did not want to die, but if she must, she would rather die without pain.

"I know nothing more about the plans afoot," she said pleadingly. "I only know a bit of gossip about the past, from my old bardmaster..."

"Go on."

"This is not the first time inheritance powder has been given to a Queen of Ferelden. When Emperor Florian was

dying, he became spiteful."

Bronwyn exhaled, utterly taken aback. "Queen Rowan was poisoned? Are you sure?"

"No. I am not sure. It was only gossip I overheard. I know nothing more about it. It could have been mere boasting. Still, Queen Rowan grew ill and fell into a decline and nothing could be done for her. It took a long time, but she died."

Wondering what to do with this bombshell, Bronwyn gestured to her companion. "That's enough, then. Zevran." She held out the little cup to him and he produced a vial.

"Only three drops would suffice for a peaceful sleep. With half the vial, you will sleep forever," he told Erlina.

Bronwyn gazed into the innocent liquid, and then presented it to the traitor. "Drink it down, and do not try anything foolish."

"I don't suppose..." Erlina faltered, "...that I could speak to a priest?"

Zevran rolled his eyes. Bronwyn said shortly, "No. You cannot. Take the cup."

Erlina's hands were shaking, as Bronwyn set the cup firmly in them. Erlina bit back a sob. Now that the end of her life had come, she was very frightened. "I don't want to die," she choked out. "Please, I don't want to die!" She threw herself on her knees in front of Bronwyn. "I don't want to die!"

"*Bella mia*," Zevran urged. "Drink it down quickly. It will be over—*phffff!*"

"No!" Erlina looked up at them, eyes running with tears. "No!" She threw the cup away and began screaming. "No! No! No! No! No!"

Zevran pulled his dagger, and Erlina shrieked and lashed out, hands scrabbling, fingers cut as she tried to push the blade away. "No! NO! No-o-o-o-o-o-o!"

"Andraste's nightgown!" Bronwyn shouted, her nerves frayed by the elf's screams. She reached down her boot for her own dagger.

"No!" Zevran shouted. "Stay back! You will soil your gown!"

The door burst open, and Astrid stood there, looking exasperated. "Stone-sodding idiots!" she growled. "How hard is it to kill one elf girl?"

She had her answer in a moment. Zevran moved in expertly, yanking Erlina's arm behind her back to get it out of his way. His hand was a quicksilver blur as he drew his blade across her throat. Erlina stared at them in horror, her screams bubbling and then dying away in a gurgle. She slid down, slumping hard on the stone floor, one hand still raised in a last protest.

There was quite a bit of blood. Bronwyn saw, to her irritation, that she was standing in a puddle of it. Her boots left red tracks as she stalked from the room, shaken and sickened. Erlina had begged her, Bronwyn, for her life, and it was more painful than Bronwyn could have imagined. Had she been alone in there, what might she have done? She had seen her father and mother on the days when

they had passed judgement on criminals, and sometimes, when the malefactor threw themselves on the Teyrn or Teyrna's mercy, they were granted it. On those occasions, Bronwyn had thought her parents were being too lenient, but now she understood how terrible it was to hold a frightened, defenseless person's life in one's hand...

"So," Astrid asked her, perfectly nonchalant. "Are we going to see the Queen now?"

Bronwyn took a breath and fought for calm. "Y-es," she finally answered. "We'll collect Jowan from the library and see the Queen. Yes. Thank you, Zevran. I made arrangements for her —" she gestured, not quite looking at Erlina — "disposal. The maids will clean in here later. Sergeant Quincall is in the guards' day room and will know what to do." She scuffed her boots on the floor, trying to rid herself of the red witness of a woman's death.

Jowan fell into step with them as they passed the library.

"Very nice," commented Astrid, admiring Jowan's new doublet. It smelled faintly of its time in storage, but the embroidered silk was rich and lustrous. Jowan was dressed like a gentleman of the Court, but in Warden colors. A gentleman of the Court, of course, who just happened to be walking about holding a mage's staff.

"Very nice indeed," Bronwyn said. "Was your afternoon productive?"

"Go ahead," he boasted, his smile ironic, "Quiz me about

political marriages in Nevarra and how many times the Pentaghasts have held the post of Captain-General or Chancellor. I dare you."

Bronwyn managed a light laugh. "I bow to your expertise. What about the dragons?"

"I still don't know *how* they killed them," Jowan admitted, "but I know how much gold they amassed from the hunts. I also think the current Pentaghasts don't remember, because there are dragons on the border between Nevarra and Orlais that nobody seems to know what to do with. Of course," Jowan shrugged, "the Pentaghasts are much too powerful and important to spend their time hunting dragons now."

"That *is* interesting," Bronwyn said.

Astrid thought a little about that. "Yes, it's interesting. Are there any songs or ballads about the dragon hunters?"

"Probably," Jowan said, "Do you think —?"

The captain of the Queen's Guard interrupted this intriguing line of thought, and they were shown into the royal apartments. Bronwyn gave the names of her companions to the velvet-voiced seneschal.

"You will be received in the Little Audience Chamber today," he murmured unctuously.

Astrid looked about her with interest. This palace was big enough, to be sure, but rather dull and plain, when all was said and done. The stonework was competent — and probably dwarven — but uncarved and unornamented.

The good chairs and cabinets of wood would have been valuable in Orzammar, but were no better than those in the Wardens' quarters. Astrid knew that Ferelden was a poor country compared to Orlais, and it was made manifest when one compared this place to what she had read of the grandeur of the Empress of Orlais' palace, with its walls paneled with polished amber and malachite.

The Little Audience Chamber was not a *bad* room. There were some decent hangings to soften the stone walls — mostly depicting mabari. Astrid liked Bronwyn's dog well enough, but the glorification of dogs in Ferelden was simply *odd*. No wonder people everywhere else referred to Fereldans as Dog Lords.

A low dais supported a pair of thrones: simple chairs of high quality wood, polished to a silken sheen. Behind the throne was a purple velvet arras, with another dog tapestry hung just in front of it. Fireplaces on either side of the room kept it pleasantly unchilled. A pair of tall bronze braziers on either side of the dais contributed light and some decoration. Astrid thought the room could be improved immeasurably by laying a floor of marble tiles over the plain stone.

The arras was drawn aside by a servant, and Queen Anora emerged from a door behind the dais. Everyone bowed as the queen took her throne — the one on the left. A seneschal said quietly, "Your Majesty: the Warden-Commander of Ferelden, the Grey Warden Jowan, and the

Grey Warden Astrid.”

Astrid straightened and examined the blonde human woman. She had heard that Queen Anora was a renowned beauty, and her reputation was deserved. She was a most comely woman, even had she not been the wife of a king.

“Welcome, Commander,” said the queen. Astrid thought she sounded sincere in that. Her voice was pleasant. “And welcome to you, Warden Jowan. To you as well, Warden Astrid. We are grateful for the assistance of our good allies of Orzammar. I understand that ‘Astrid’ is something of a *nom-de-guerre*. Am I correct in understanding that your original name is Gytha Aeducan; and that you are daughter of the late King Endrin and sister to the current King Bhelen?”

Astrid bowed again, “Your information is faultless, Your Majesty. I was Gytha Aeducan, and now I am the Grey Warden Astrid.”

Queen Anora seemed pleased at her answer, and smiled graciously. Obviously, the queen liked to think of herself as a highly intelligent woman. Perhaps she was. Her illness was not very apparent at the moment, but she did look a bit tired. About thirty years old, Astrid guessed, though her illness might have given her a few years that were not rightfully hers. She was dressed well, but wore no jewels, and her hair was plainly arranged in a pair of coiled plaits. Perhaps this was her appearance for a private audience. Astrid hoped she put forth more of an effort for formal occasions. People liked kings and queens to look the part.

This was Teyrn Loghain’s daughter, though Astrid saw little or no resemblance to that towering, glowering, black-haired champion. This woman was tall, but delicate-looking. Not a warrior queen, but a queen of plots and politics; a queen of cunning and scheming and double-dealing. She was apparently well-disposed to the commander, but would bear watching. Her position seemed strong, but was in fact precarious. She had been married to King Cailan for five years and had borne him no children. Now her enemies were trying to depose or kill her. Humans did not follow the customs of Orzammar, and so Alistair, whom Astrid had discovered was a bastard son of the late King, was not the heir, as he would be in Orzammar. It was all very foolish, and all too human. Alistair was a fine warrior, and with proper guidance and training would make a decent leader. He was a far better choice for crown prince than any mewling infant the Queen might eventually produce. For that matter, why did not this woman discreetly take a lover, and make a little princeling herself, if her husband was inadequate? Astrid would certainly have done so in her place. Of course, humans had their Chantry and their sins and their guilt, and tricking the King in that way was probably something the Queen would never consider. More fool she.

“It is my understanding, Commander,” Anora said to Bronwyn, “that you intend to leave the city tomorrow afternoon.”

“That is correct, Majesty.”

“I wish to bid you farewell, and give you some tokens

of my trust and esteem. Bring all your people with you before you leave."

"I shall, Majesty."

"Very well. Then I thank you for your presence, Warden Astrid. You have our leave to depart."

Astrid bowed again, and hid her smile. Anora's last words amused her. In her childhood, Father had explained to her that those particular words, when spoken by a monarch, meant, "I'm busy. Go away." Backing away with scrupulous courtesy, she did.

The servants were also sent from the room, and Jowan cast healing and regeneration spells on Anora. Bronwyn could see the results instantly. Anora was enveloped in a blue glow, and as it dissipated, she took a deep, relaxed breath.

"Thank you, Warden Jowan. I feel, as always, refreshed by your treatment. I cannot tell you how relieved I am that you will be remaining here in the Palace."

When he too was gone, Anora asked, "Have you dealt with that unpleasant matter, Commander?"

"I have, Your Majesty."

"Good. We shall be dining informally in my sitting room. Come."

It was a very nice dinner indeed. It was one of the best dinners Bronwyn had ever had. It was not quite enough food for a Grey Warden, but what there was, was choice.

Bronwyn wondered if the Queen was simply seizing

the opportunity to have a dinner like this with another woman. The Queen, as far as she knew, had no close woman friends. The food was too delicate to appeal to the King, at least from what Bronwyn had witnessed of his dining habits. And Loghain... Bronwyn sighed mentally, wistfully recalling fierce strong arms, a man's musk, and moments of wild abandon. Did the Queen have any idea about Bronwyn's relations with her father? Bronwyn devoutly hoped not. It was simply too embarrassing.

But Loghain would certainly have snorted at the daintily arranged table, the hothouse flowers, the clear consommé, the delicately spiced galantine, and the *caille en sarcophage*, served with chilled Antivan wine. This repast was definitely designed with high-born ladies in mind. Next came an astonishing dessert: an Orlesian vacherin. Bronwyn almost regretted demolishing the exquisite little basket of meringue, filled with whipped, sweetened cream and ripe summer berries.

"This is marvelous," she said. Perhaps she should not comment on it. Perhaps commenting on it made clear that she was not accustomed to eating this well. Still, the Queen seemed pleased that she was pleased.

"I sometimes wonder," said Anora, "if men even notice what they are eating, other than complaining if there is not enough meat! Your dear mother and I occasionally dined alone, before I was married. It was always very pleasant. Eleanor was so kind to me: so gracious and so full

of wise advice. I can hardly describe the extent to which she helped me navigate those first few years at Court."

"My mother was always full of wise advice," sighed Bronwyn. "I wish I had listened to more of it." If she had listened, perhaps she too would have been included in those dinners. She would have been at Court, and not relegated to the country. Everything might have been different. A brief pang of jealousy shot through her, picturing Mother and Anora, dining together, sharing secrets and sublime food. Bronwyn could not remember ever sharing a private meal with her mother... just the two of them alone. It would have been... lovely.

She must not regret the past, which could not be helped. She polished off her dessert, not quite satisfied; and comforted herself with the knowledge that when she returned to the Compound she could cadge a bowl of stew from good old Rannelly.

"I shall give you a letter to my father," said Anora. "I shall tell him of the poisoning and my condition. If I continue to feel as well as I do, I see no reason for him to leave the army. Perhaps that is even what our enemies wished. I see from your expression that I have hit the mark."

Without explicitly mentioning Erlina's name, Bronwyn replied, "Yes. Our source indicated that when he heard of your condition and hurried back to you, he was to be arrested and confined. Later..."

"I quite see." Anora's lovely face grew hard. "Take him

my letter. I am all right. I can endure everything I must endure. If he can send me this Wynne, that would be appreciated, but for now Warden Jowan has helped me a great deal. It is generous of you to spare one of your Wardens for my exclusive benefit."

"Ferelden cannot spare *you*, Your Majesty."

"You may call me Anora, here in my sitting room."

"Thank you... Anora. Ferelden cannot spare you for a multitude of reasons. It cannot spare your father. And if for no other reason, I simply cannot bear the idea of the Orlesians winning, especially by such guile and treachery."

"Does your brother feel the same?"

"My brother is loyal, if that is what you mean. He is loyal to Ferelden, and loyal to you. We have talked, and made our decision. We have some time before anyone even knows that the contract has been delayed. Much may happen in that time. I wish I could have seen Fergus before he went to Amaranthine, but I am certain of his loyalties."

"He gave me a charming present," Anora remarked. She rang a small crystal bell by her place, and the maidservant appeared. "Regan, bring me the music box from the table over there."

It was brought, and admired. Bronwyn had never seen it, as Fergus had bought it for Oriana after Bronwyn had ceased coming to Denerim.

"The Princess on the Glass Hill! I always loved that story, I suppose because Fergus and I were so fond of climbing. It

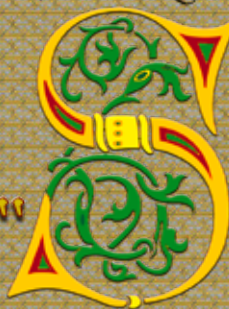
made us appreciate the hero's precarious situation all the more, in that bit of the story when he was trying to clamber up the polished hill and rescue the princess."

"I, too, am fond of the story, because I appreciate the equally precarious situation of the princess! Now," Anora said, setting the little box aside, "tell me *everything* going on at Ostagar."



BRONWYN COUSLAND, WARDEN COMMANDER

CHAPTER 16



ADVENTURES
IN THE SOUTH

"PICE COOKIES!" Carver nearly shouted. "Where did you get them?"

"A soldier named Tanna," Leliana told him, dimpling. "She's the

best baker in Maric's Shield. I have no idea how she manages. She's built some sort of oven out of the ruins of Ostagar!"

"I have *got* to meet her," Carver declared, inhaling the treats. "She is a hero among cookie-makers."

"A taste of home?' Leliana teased.

"Ha!" Carver snorted. "My mother is great and all, but she's not the world's best cook. And a worse baker. My sister Bethany at least can bake decent bread. We *never* had anything like this at home."

They sat comfortably, just the two of them, by the campfire. Carver was very grateful to Alistair for allowing him to go see his family. He was nervous about it, but hoped he could convince them not to leave Ferelden. It seemed a crazy plan to him. Yes, Mother had been the daughter of Kirkwall nobles, but they had cut her off when she eloped with Father. Why look backward, when she and Father



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had made a new life here?

Kirkwall was a horrible place, anyway. Everybody knew that. Who would want to deliberately go live in a place called 'The City of Chains?' How could they even *consider* taking Bethany there? It was tricky enough in Lothing, with her secretly being a mage. In Kirkwall, the Templars had largely taken over the city. They had murdered Viscount Threnfall when he tried to limit their power. The new Viscount was nothing more than a puppet. At least that's what Uncle Gamlen said in his letters.

And there was something strange about Kirkwall anyway: some mystery that was hinted at but never explained. Why did so many mages go mad and become abominations there? There was no place so haunted and so dangerous as Kirkwall. Why they even had a Circle of Mages there was the biggest mystery of all. It was a bad, bad place, and Carver had not the least desire to go there. Mother might be sentimental, but her children owed it to her to be rational. Ferelden was their home, and their home was in danger. They should be staying to defend it, not fleeing across the Waking Sea. That smacked of... desertion.

"You are worried, Carver," Leliana said softly. "Don't be. Trust in the Maker."

"Leliana," he said uncertainly, "there's something I need to tell you about my family..."

It had occurred to him that with her background in the Chantry, she might be horrified to hear about Bethany



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and Father, but she was not. He blurted out the truth, and she was unafraid.

"I am sure that your sister is a lovely girl," she said. "Everyone must find their own path to the Maker. Is that not what the Prophet Andraste taught?"

He grumbled, "It's not what the *Chantry* says these days. I like your ideas better. Just... don't tell your old friends about Bethany. We're twins, you see. We've always been close. Don't... tell them."

She dimpled again. "I wouldn't dream of it."

They took turns standing watch that night. There was no way they could reach Lothing in a single day, even were it not for the darkspawn. Carver thought Leliana looked very pretty asleep. Her mouth pouted a little, like she was dreaming of kissing someone. He sighed, and made himself think of other things. With the dawn, they were on horseback again, and resumed their way northward.

There was quite a bit of traffic on the Imperial Highway: couriers for various noblemen, traders and victualers and merchants with protective guards. They nodded respectfully at the griffon tabards.

"Good day to you, Wardens!"

Leliana always replied. Carver followed suit. Being a Warden was being a part of something very special. It was even worth the nightmares. Besides, Leliana said that you got used to those after a while. He told her more about their home in Lothing. She knew Lothing, and

so could picture where it was.

"So it's on the other side of the river? I did not go there often. The Chantry's fields and gardens were to the south. We were not encouraged to go out much in the village. I think I know your house, though."

"It's not a big house, but we've always liked it. Mother would have liked something off by itself, with a bit of land. It turns out that with the darkspawn that wouldn't have worked out very well. We couldn't have managed the rent anyway. Still, maybe I can put together enough someday to help Adam purchase a freehold. That would be something."

"I don't remember meeting Adam in Lothering," she said. "Is he in the militia?"

"He doesn't go to the Chantry much, and he wouldn't have been there when Bronwyn was mustering the militia," Carver shrugged. "He missed the big battle. He was up in Denerim, trying to talk the Bann into giving him a commission. Of course it didn't happen, since Adam didn't have enough money to pay off the right people. He may be in the militia now. I don't know. He might do better to enlist in Maric's Shield, and I'll tell him so. He'd be a private soldier, but he's educated and a good fighter. They promote on merit. He'd probably be an officer in no time."

"Is your brother as gifted a warrior as you?"

Such a question, phrased in such a way, could not but bring a smile to Carver's lips. It pleased him so much he could answer it fairly.

"Adam's really, really good. He's a sword and board man: fast and strong. He's smart, too, and canny in a fight. He's always been hard to beat when we've sparred, but for a long time it was mostly because he was four years older. I think he should have gone into the army years ago, but Father made him promise to look after Mother and Bethany."

"Perhaps," Leliana suggested mildly, "he could look after them better with regular army pay."

"That's what I decided to do," Carver smiled. "I've saved most of my pay to bring to them, and I've got some other things I've picked up, too. It should help. Mother's never really worked, you see, and she and Bethany don't know how to do much of anything... practical. It was Mother's noble upbringing, you see. Well, they embroider beautifully, and Bethany makes a bit of money from that, but Mother hates selling her work."

"I... see," Leliana said softly. She did, too. In Orlais, she had met her share of gentry fallen on hard times. It was always a sad spectacle, especially for the women. A few, strong and brave enough, with money enough for equipment, made their way as warriors. Many more took vows in the Chantry, though of course that was impossible for Carver's sister, and it should not be done unless the Maker had given them a true vocation. Leliana had even heard of bards of noble birth, amusing and entertaining those who once boasted of knowing their families. Some of course, became courtesans if they were beautiful and

very, very clever: and some ended walking the streets if they were not. Some closed the curtains of their decaying mansions, and died of genteel starvation.

"Does your sister play the lute or sing?" she asked.

"Pretty well," Carver allowed. "Adam and I used to tease her, but Mother said it was an accomplishment that all gentlewomen must have. She doesn't do it in public, of course. Mother wouldn't stand for it."

Leliana rolled her eyes. How to help people who felt they were too good to help themselves? At least Carver was trying to make his own way in the world. The brother, too, sounded like he was willing to find employment, if his mother and sister could be safe.

By late afternoon, they were turning from the Highway, and were in Lothing. The militiamen at the gates greeted them cheerfully and called out congratulations to Carver on becoming a Grey Warden. Carver thanked them, grinning, and pushed his horse along, obviously eager to see his family. Chickens clucked indignantly, flapping out of the horses' paths.

"There's the house! I can't wait to give them my presents!"

They tied up the horses outside, and Carver opened the door for Leliana.

"Mother! Bethany! I'm home, and I brought a guest!"

A big mabari looked up suspiciously from a corner, and then got up to greet Carver in a friendly way.

"This is Hunter. He's Adam's dog."

"A very handsome fellow," Leliana laughed, letting the

dog sniff her hand.

A pretty girl with wavy black hair rushed downstairs to them, and threw her arms around Carver.

"Carver!" she exclaimed in an oddly hushed tone. "Don't shout! Uncle's very sick. Oh, I'm so glad to see you, but we must be quiet..."

"Wait! Bethany, this is Leliana. She's a Grey Warden, too."

"How do you do? Will you be staying? Of course you will, but I'm afraid you'll need to share my room, because we're a bit crowded right now. Uncle has Mother's room, and she's moved in with me, and..."

Leliana absently rubbed the mabari's ears, and studied Carver's twin with no little amount of pleasure. Very pretty indeed: the eyes large, dark, and expressive; the skin well cared-for; the voice modulated and sweet. With time, Leliana felt quite a bit could be made of such a girl. She had been trained to be a lady: that much was clear. Whether she could be trained to earn her bread was an entirely different matter. But her pleasant ruminations were interrupted by the brother and sister's urgent conversation.

"What do you mean, 'uncle?'" Carver peered down into his sister's face. "Our only uncle is Uncle Gamlen in Kirkwall!"

"Well," his sister sighed, "he's 'Uncle Gamlen in Lothing' now."

"What?"

"Shhh!"

A family crisis, of course. Leliana eavesdropped dis-

creetly while studying the room. It was decent enough: an all-purpose room for living and cooking, fairly well kept. A pot of soup bubbled on the hearth. While her hosts caught up on events, Leliana helpfully shifted the pot to keep the soup from boiling over. Voices came from a room next door. If Carver's family could not offer her a place to stay, Leliana knew she could always have a bed at the Chantry.

The door opened, and another young woman emerged, her brown hair a cloud of curls.

"This is our cousin Charade," Bethany told Carver. "She got Uncle here safely when he lost everything and his enemies tried to kill him."

Carver's jaw was hanging. "Hello," he managed. "I didn't know we had a cousin."

The girl shrugged. "I'm a bastard," she said with proud indifference. "Father didn't know about me either, until recently. Good job for him he finally did, because they would have killed him for sure, if I hadn't got him on a boat and out of Kirkwall."

"Well... thanks," said Carver. "I guess this means we don't have a mansion or a title waiting for us in the Free Marches."

"I guess not," Charade said. Leliana noted that her speech and manner was considerably less polished than the Hawkes. Her mother was probably a commoner. However, the girl seemed sensible and resourceful.

"Don't gloat, Carver," Bethany said softly. "Mother is absolutely crushed."

Carver saw Leliana listening from the hearth. "Leliana! I'm so sorry. You must think we're the rudest people in Lothering! Cousin... Charade?... this is the Grey Warden Leliana. I'm a Grey Warden, too, though you might have heard that."

The girl snorted in a very unladylike way. "I might have heard a word or two about it. Congratulations. It sounds like Ferelden needs all the Wardens it can get!"

Bethany said, "I'm very happy to meet one of Carver's new friends, Warden Leliana. If he's happy, I'm happy, but I miss him terribly."

"Of course you do," Leliana said soothingly. "You are twins, and very close. Carver has told me so much about you."

The girl gave her brother a panic-stricken glance. "And... just what did he say?"

"Nothing you need worry about," Leliana assured her. "It was all very nice. I have other friends who are also talented people."

"Look," Carver said, "I really, really have to tend to the horses..."

Leliana smiled. "I'll be fine, Carver."

She helped Bethany and Charade arrange the simple supper at the trestle table: soup, bread, yellow cheese, and a bowl of elfberries. There was a little trouble finding bowls for everyone, but Carver brought their packs in, and Leliana fished out her tin camp bowl and her own silver spoon. Eventually the door to the bedroom opened, and Carver's mother and brother were introduced.

Leandra Hawke clearly had been a great beauty, and was still a very handsome woman. Bethany strongly resembled her. The mother had the same sweet voice as Bethany, but hers was now worn into fretfulness. Leliana believed Carver's stories of how his mother had been so admired that a very noble, very advantageous marriage had been arranged for her. Instead, she had eloped with a Fereldan commoner. Leliana was very fond of a romantic tale herself: no one could be fonder. However, in real life, romantic tales of elopement often ended just like this: with loss and regret, and trying to eke out a living.

Carver was obviously jealous of his older brother, so Leliana was careful not to flirt. Adam Hawke was extremely attractive, certainly. Right now, he looked harried and out of sorts, but he greeted Leliana civilly enough, and urged her to sit and join them for supper. He took the chair at the head of the table, and his dog sat down by him, gazing on him lovingly.

And then the talking began: Leliana assured Mistress Hawke that Carver could not change his mind and be released from the Wardens. On the contrary, he was doing very well, and they were all glad to have him. She immediately changed the subject to the sick uncle and his difficult journey.

"Poor Gamlen!" mourned Leandra. "He's been the victim of a ruthless plot. Charade here says he would have been killed — *killed* — had he remained in Kirkwall!"

"He certainly would have been," Charade said briefly. "We had to find the first ship that would take us away. We

were lucky it was bound for Denerim."

"I've never been to Denerim," Bethany remarked. "Is it wonderful?"

"Not if you're short of funds, but most places are like that. With the war and all, people thought we were crazy to go south, but you're Father's only relatives, so it was here or nothing."

Leandra grew teary eyed. "The Amell family home... gone to strangers..."

Charade gave her an odd look. "Yes. It's a shame, but there's nothing to be done. The house is gone, the fortune is gone, and there's nothing in Kirkwall for us but a dagger in the dark. I know we can't impose indefinitely. I'll look for work. With all the men in the army, people will need help in the mills or the fields. I'm strong and I can work hard. I should be able to find something."

"You don't have to work in the fields!" Adam burst out. "Of course you can stay here!"

"Of course you can stay," Leandra seconded, more hesitantly. "You're family, after all. We'll just have to adjust and make do..."

Carver grinned and pulled out his money bag. "I can help! I've saved up quite a bit of my pay, and I have presents. I might as well give them now. Who made the soup, by the way? It's really good."

"Your cousin Charade," Leandra said mildly. "She is quite the housekeeper."

Carver was quite proud of his presents, and he had bought some extra things, so he had something he could give Charade too. She seemed a nice girl, and it was sort of grand to have a cousin, especially one who knew how to cook. He wondered if she knew how to make spice cookies.

Adam looked at the contents of the money bag. "Are you sure you can spare all this?"

"It's for the family," Carver said firmly, proud that he had done something at last: something genuinely helpful.

"I won't say it's not welcome, but you mustn't short yourself," his brother said. "Really, Carver..."

Leliana finished her meal, and said, "I'm sure you would prefer to discuss your family business in private. I could go to the Chantry to pray..."

"No, don't go," Carver pleaded. "You have such good ideas."

Adam gave Leliana a keen, admiring glance. "If Carver trusts you, then it's fine with me. Obviously, we've had a major change of plans. Mother, I really am going to have to find employment. We can't go on living on the remains of the nest egg Father earned. It won't last forever, and I need more to do than I'm doing here."

"But you're in the militia now..." Leandra said, and then grimaced, "under the command of Tobery Salt!"

"Tobery is a fine swordsman and good fellow," Adam said patiently, in the tone of one who has talked about a subject all he cared to. "With Charade here now to help you around the house, I think I'll have to join the army at Ostagar."

"That's great news!" Carver said enthusiastically. His mother and sister clearly did not agree.

"Adam," pleaded his mother, "promise me you won't join the Grey Wardens!"

"If I may," Leliana said gently, "perhaps our Commander can help when she returns to Ostagar. She has influence with many of the nobles in the army, and might be able to be of service. She is generous to all of us, and would, I am sure, be willing to help a Warden's kinsman." She smiled winningly, "Especially one who also has a good mabari friend!"

"The Girl Warden!" Carver crowed. "Lady Bronwyn Cousland! I'll bet she could get you something, Adam! Her brother is the Teyrn of Highever. She has Teyrn Loghain's ear, and she's a cousin of Arl Bryland. He thinks a lot of her. She killed a dragon east of Ostagar, and he gave her the title of Dragonslayer. She'll probably come through Lothering on her way back, but even if she doesn't, I can tell her you're looking for an appointment."

Leandra looked more hopeful. She had heard of the Couslands, who had trade agreements with Kirkwall. "Dragonslayer! I hope you weren't there, Carver. It sounds so dangerous..."

"Actually, Mother — " Carver began. Adam caught his eye, and chuckled, shaking his head. Carver grinned back.

"If only Adam didn't have to leave home," Leandra complained. "If only Bann Ceorlic were more helpful..."

Adam sat back, thinking. "Bann Ceorlic isn't going to

do anything for someone who can't buy his commission, Mother. Lady Bronwyn really may be my best chance. When do you think she'll be back in Ostagar, Carver?"

"We're not sure, but she told Alistair — you met him — that she wouldn't be long. Another week, maybe? She might want you to spar with her before she gives a recommendation, so be ready for the scrap of your life!"

It was a success, her meeting with the queen: an unqualified success.

Bronwyn returned to the Compound with a spring in her step, very satisfied at the degree of her understanding with Anora, very easily putting out of her mind the wretched fate of the traitor Erlina.

Did she like Anora? She did, rather. Anora might not have many female friends, but neither did Bronwyn. Her life in Highever had been too isolated. People were intimidated by her birth and education, or by her skill at arms. There were no female knights her own age in the castle, nor any young gentlewomen squiring there. Cutting herself off from the Landsmeets by her own willfulness, she had also cut herself off from the opportunity to build friendships with young women with whom she had the most in common. If there were to be a life beyond the Blight — if she and Loghain might have a future together — perhaps Anora might be a not unpleasant part of it.

There was still the matter of the lovely but insufficient

dinner, but a word to Rannelly, and a large napkin to cover her gown, and she was seated at the table in the Warden's hall, wolfing down a bowl of lamb and pea stew. It seemed a shame to combine that with the exquisite cuisine Anora had provided, but Bronwyn knew she would not sleep well hungry; and indeed, it would be ridiculous to go hungry, when all the servants in the Compound wanting nothing more than to feed her.

She was scraping the bowl, wondering if she wanted another, when the elves found her.

"Jowan and Astrid are in the study, talking about books," Tara told her, sliding onto the bench. "Didn't the Queen feed you?"

"Of course. The food was gorgeous, but not enough for a Warden." Bronwyn gave the bowl another careful scrape. "The dessert was this basket of meringue — that's sugared egg whites whipped until they're puffy. They were piped through a fancy funnel and made into a basket and baked. Then the basket was filled with whipped cream and berries. It was beautiful."

"It sounds too pretty to eat."

"Almost. But I am, after all, a Warden."

Danith thought it sounded odd, though cream and berries were wholesome enough. "We wish to discuss what we found in the Alienage today."

Rannelly saw the Wardens sitting together and brought out a plate of oatmeal cookies and a pitcher of cider. Bronwyn thanked her, thinking that a cookie was just what

she needed to fill up the corners. "Of course," she said to Danith. "I can see it was troubling all of you."

Zevran nibbled a cookie, thinking it over. "I believe, noble one, that it disturbed us for different reasons and in different ways. Nevertheless, I too am concerned. Something is wrong there."

Not wanting to be sidetracked by shemlen politics, Danith said at once, "Do you know a noblewoman by the name of Lady Landra?"

Astonished, Bronwyn dropped her spoon into the bowl with a dull clang. "Lady Landra? Why would someone in the Alienage speak of her? Of course I know Lady Landra. She was one of my mother's dearest friends! She was staying with us when Howe's men attacked us, and she was killed. My mother was heartbroken when we found her body."

"You probably don't know if she had a servant with her..." Tara ventured. "An elven maid? Would she have been there at the time?"

Bronwyn's mind was racing... there had been that pretty lady's maid. Lady Landra had even introduced her... what was her name... ?

"Lady Landra's maid?" she said, beginning to smile. "Did you meet her? Did she escape the massacre? That's wonderful news —"

"No," Danith said shortly. "We did not meet the woman, but her child. She is waiting for her mother to return from Highever. It seems that you do not know for certain that

she is dead."

Bronwyn was still trying to remember the name... Iona... Nona...

"Iona. That was her name. A very pretty woman. Blonde hair. We talked a bit in the library. I believe she did mention a daughter, and perhaps she mentioned that she was with relatives. She was certainly not at Highever." She sighed. "No, I don't know what happened to Iona. Mother and I found Lady Landra's body, but not Iona's. She was not in the library either. It's possible that she was carried off somewhere, but considering the brutality of the attack, I wouldn't hold out much hope that she is still alive."

"The child's relatives are also gone," Danith said. "They left town to find work —"

"— and we want to tell you about that, too," Tara interposed.

Danith made a face, and went on. "— and the child now lives in the house of the hahren. Her care is inadequate. Among the Dalish, such neglect would be inconceivable."

"I am very sorry to hear it," Bronwyn replied. "I shall send some coin to this... hahren... for the child's care. Does he seem a reliable sort?"

Danith wanted to say no, but Zevran broke in suavely, "He is the elder of the Alienage. I believe him to be a man of good character, though of slender means. If you gave him coin for the child, it would be used for her benefit."

"I agree," Tara said firmly. "Valendrian is a very nice man."

"The child would be better off away from that terrible

place altogether," Danith burst out. "Commander, I wish to take the child with us. She could be placed with Zathrian's clan, among people who would care for her properly —"

Zevran and Tara stared at her in astonishment. Their astonishment, however, was nothing compared to Bronwyn's.

"Take a *child* with us?" she echoed, incredulous. "Danith, we cannot honestly guarantee the child's safety! We could be set upon by darkspawn or bandits or wolves!"

"I would protect her," Danith replied stubbornly. Already, a wormish doubt had bored through her certainty. Obviously, the child would be better off among the Dalish. Getting her there safely, however, was a genuine problem. Still, she hated to back down from a shemlen.

"The Wardens," she said scornfully, "are supposed to be the heroes of legend. How can we not protect one child? I do not demand that she travel to Ostagar with us. There would be no one to care for her, and indeed the journey is too long. But I have from Keeper Marethari the location where Zathrian's clan will be camped this time of year. With Tara's magic, we can be there in two days. The child can ride with me on my horse. The Dalish travel constantly, and we do not leave our children behind."

Taken aback by such a vociferous protest, Bronwyn looked a little uncertainly at Tara and Zevran. What was Danith *thinking*?

Zevran offered, "While I do not think taking the child with us is a sound plan —" He held up his hand against

Danith's protests " — I understand her interest. The child Amethyne is very appealing, very charming. Her story is a sad one: one that would soften even the heart of a Crow. And there are elements that reflect on troubles in the Alienage."

Tara nodded. "Yes! She was in the orphanage after her relatives left the city, and someone in authority abducted all the children and their caregivers. Valendrian thinks there's something wrong about this work in the north. You remember that we learned that Bann Vaughan has been sending people north for months. Well, no one has heard from them since. Oh —" something occurred to her that might interest Bronwyn. "and Valendrian said he was trying to contract his friends in the Highever Alienage and hadn't heard from them either."

"You see!" Danith said triumphantly. "The child is not safe!"

"Wait!" Bronwyn put up her hand. "Bann Vaughan has been sending people north... yes, we knew that. Adaia told us about it, since Shianni was nearly caught, too, urging others not to go. It was being kept rather secret. I presumed that they were going to work for Howe, and Vaughan did not want to sully himself by association. But no one has heard from them? No letters?"

"Nothing," Tara affirmed. "Nothing at all. Valendrian tried to send someone to Highever, but it was just too dangerous, and the man had to turn back. Some men tried to "round him up," and they said. Something about "rounding up" all the elves. It must be an awfully big project to

need so many workers."

"They might be fortifying Amaranthine City, or they might be digging in at Vigil's Keep... or both," Bronwyn considered. "And if they wanted to keep the nature of the work secret, it might explain why people can't get letters back and forth. Still, it doesn't sound good. And to take children? Why would they take children? Surely children would not be useful at such work. They could carry water, I suppose..."

Zevran was staring at the table, the corners of his mouth turned down. "Children can be valuable," he said slowly. "In Antiva, in Tevinter... in many places, slavers can get a good price for young children. The carpet-makers can train little ones as young as five years to knot wool. And the brothels, of course, can use children even younger..."

Bronwyn shuddered at the image. "There is no slavery in Ferelden! ...And who would sell a child for such a purpose, anyway? I can't believe it..." She blushed. "I know that such crimes exist, but here..."

Danith, if anything, was more shocked than Bronwyn. "Sell children as —" she sputtered.

"We're just talking," Tara said softly. "We don't know anything. They might have them weed gardens. I've heard of children doing that. Let's not jump to conclusions."

"We are to see the Queen before we leave," Bronwyn said, making up her mind. "I shall tell her that something untoward is happening to the elves. She is the best person to deal with such a thing. She is in contact with Fergus,

and can send a message with the next courier. He can look into the matter. Of course, it's horrible that the orphans were abducted, but we cannot abduct a child ourselves, Danith. Iona placed her child in the Alienage: that was her decision, and we have heard nothing that would give us any legal right to remove her."

Danith rose, glaring, hands balled into fists. "If it were a shemlen child, you would not be so indifferent!"

"That's not fair!" Tara gasped.

Zevran rose, too, to put a strong but gentle hand on Danith's shoulder. "Sit, my halla," he ordered. Reluctantly Danith resumed her seat on the bench beside him. He went on, with quiet authority. "We cannot steal this child. The mother might be a prisoner of the this Arl Howe. She might be trying to return home as we speak. What if she were to return, only to find that the child is gone? Her sufferings would be cruel."

Bronwyn felt inexpressible gratitude to the former Crow. "You speak well and wisely, Zevran. Danith, it cannot be. Even if this child were absolutely friendless — and it is clear she is not — we could not simply pluck this child away and take her with us. We cannot, in the midst of a Blight, turn nursemaids, however winning and lovable this child is. Perhaps, when the fighting is over, you might see if the child is orphaned indeed and in need of your help. For now, it seems to me that she is far safer in the house of this Valendrian, than she would be in the wilds of the Brecilian Forest!"

"The child is not safe! No elf is safe in this horrible city! I shall not forget this!" Danith snarled. Shaking off Zevran's hand, she flung away, and stalked from the hall.

"She'll come to her senses, after a night's sleep," Tara sighed.

"Perhaps," Zevran said. He took another cookie, and savored it slowly.

Bronwyn took another herself. This kind of dissension was exactly what they did not need. "How old is this child, anyway? If she's bigger than an babe-in-arms, it's not like Danith can hide her away in her backpack!"

However much there was to be done before they left Denerim, Bronwyn made arrangements to bathe and wash her hair the following morning. She had no idea when next the opportunity would present itself, and she felt no embarrassment at appearing in Denerim Market with her hair in a wet braid. Everyone packed their gear as far as possible, and they set off for Denerim north of the river.

Jowan rushed to catch them up, having just visited the Queen. He was still in the velvet doublet Rannelly had found for him.

"Everyone will think we're part of your retinue, Ser Jowan," Tara teased. "You really look the part of a Fereldan nobleman."

Danith snorted in disdain, walking as far away from Jowan and Bronwyn as possible. She was otherwise silent and aloof, and Bronwyn decided to let her alone until she got

over her disappointment about the child. Surely she saw that her request was completely absurd? Bronwyn had not forgotten her promise. She had sent three sovereigns by courier to headman Valendrian for the care of the child Amethyne, and that, at the moment, was all she felt able to do.

Astrid frowned, and cocked an eyebrow up at Bronwyn. Tara had told her about the quarrell last night. Danith's behavior, in Astrid's opinion, was insubordinate. Bronwyn would need to watch her. Take a child with them, indeed! The elf would do better to find herself a useful pet, like Bronwyn's dog Scout, if she craved affection.

Tara and Jowan's curious new staffs were ready at the Wonders of Thedas. Extraordinary as they were, the Tranquil proprietor showed neither pride in the achievement, nor curiosity about the uses they would be put to. He presented them to Tara and Jowan with the same bland monotone that was his only manner. Similar "swords" for Morrigan and Anders were wrapped in canvas and taken along. The Tranquil craftsmen had even fashioned appropriate harness. Jowan slipped into his and buckled it, feeling a little ridiculous.

"We'll get you a dagger for the left scabbard," Bronwyn said, "for you, and Tara as well."

That could be done at the armorer's, where there was also Tara's armor to retrieve and ideas to expound with Master Wade. His latest proposal was an alchemical compound with which to coat the tips of silverite spears. It was

an expensive coating, of course, with ground diamond and lyrium among the ingredients, but with extraordinary penetrative power. He also said something that piqued Bronwyn's interest.

"I wonder if anything like the kraken-hunters use would help?"

"I don't quite follow — wait. I think I see what you mean. Like a harpoon?"

Astrid furrowed her brows. What was a harpoon? She had never heard of such a weapon. The armorer seemed to understand Bronwyn well enough, however.

"Yes, yes! Something with cables or chains attached, perhaps weighted down with something that would foul the wings."

"Could something like that be devised as a ballista bolt?"

"Certainly, though the attachment would have to be furled until the bolt was in flight. Interesting idea..."

So they talked, but not too long. Wade was engaged to make her a half-dozen of the spears — and at Danith's suggestion, two score arrowheads — and to write out his proposal for harpoons and send it to Ostagar. Bronwyn moved on to her next errand, while Astrid questioned her about harpoons, and how they were used in hunting sea serpents and other monsters of the Ferelden oceans. The idea of going out on small wooden craft with only deep water below made the dwarf woman faintly queasy, but apparently there was coin to be made when one could traverse water faster than one could travel the land routes.

There was trading, of course, but also profit to be made in hunting the sea creatures itself. Some of them yielded valuable crafting items: whale ivory and whale oil, ambergris for making perfumes. Astrid knew little of the oceans of Thedas. They were a separate world: a world of which she knew next to nothing.

She had a taste of it in their next errands in the Market. Bronwyn wished to buy presents for all her companions.

"When I was first at the Frostback Fair," Bronwyn told her, "I gave some then. Fifty silver each," she said. "Buy whatever you like, or keep the money. I shall pay. If you have any ideas for something our friends at Ostagar would like, tell me." She paused. "Astrid, I saw something before, and you might find it interesting, since you ask me of the sea..."

At a booth of expensive trinkets, Bronwyn showed Astrid a little box of whale ivory, carved with shells and fish and strangle little tentacled monsters. Bronwyn asked her if she found it interesting, and she certainly did.

And everyone wanted things that the Ostagar quartermaster could not provide: scented soaps, polishing silks, jewelry—

"Oghren would like West Hill brandy," Astrid told Bronwyn, sniffing the flask, "I'm going to get some myself. It's better than the rotgut at camp!"

"Don't forget to get yourself something, Bronwyn," Tara scolded her.

"Yes, mother," Bronwyn laughed. "I shall get another blank book for my notes, since I sent the last one to Fergus.

I saw one with a mabari on the cover."

Scout approved vocally. Bronwyn rubbed his ears. "Perhaps I should write down all the stories we've told in it..."

Even Zevran bought something.

"Now that you have paid me, I feel myself quite the man of property!" he laughed, and showed her the silver-embossed shoulder belt he had found. "I shall wear it, and think of you!"

"It is simply gorgeous..." she pointed out, straight-faced.

"But of course!"

"Warden!"

Bronwyn looked around, and found herself being hailed by a lanky, ginger-haired man, wearing the decent clothes of a commoner. Not a warrior, not even armed, so the fact that he was running after her seemed no cause for alarm. She waited, and the man caught up, puffing. Zevran moved in a little closer, just to her left.

"You're a hard woman to find, Warden!" the man said, beaming. "Been looking for you everywhere!"

"Well, here I am," Bronwyn said guardedly. "Was there something you wanted?"

"I'm Levi... Levi Dryden," the man said, eager and ingratiating. "Didn't Duncan ever tell you about me? Trader Levi? Levi of the Coins?"

"You knew Duncan?"

"Known him for years," the man assured her. "Promised to do me a favor, but events, alas, have intervened."

"What sort of... favor?" Bronwyn began to suspect that

this was something time-consuming and difficult, for if it was not, why had Duncan not already done it?

"Maybe the name 'Dryden' doesn't mean much to you," the man said, his smile fading briefly. "It doesn't mean much to anyone these days, but we were once a noble family of Ferelden. My ancestor — "

" — Sophia Dryden!" Bronwyn recognized the tainted name of one of Ferelden's most notorious traitors. "You're a descendent of Arlessa Sophia, you say?"

"Well," the man shuffled, "as you know, she was forced to become a Grey Warden, and then got involved in the doings that got the order thrown out of Ferelden. Still, we Drydens are tough. When we lost our lands, we became traders and merchants. It's been passed down to us that Sophia wasn't the traitor they branded her. The proof might be up at the old Warden fortress at Soldier's Peak!"

"And you wanted Duncan to... do what?" Bronwyn wondered.

"Go up to the Peak!" Levi urged her. "See it for yourself! The Wardens get their old fortress back, and I get a chance to prove my family were loyal!"

"Why do I think it's not as simple as all that?" Astrid remarked.

Bronwyn rolled her eyes. "Because it's not," she said shortly. "I've heard of Soldier's Peak. I think I've even seen the tops of its towers in the distance. It's up north in the Coast Mountains. It's supposed to be haunted..." She gave the merchant a questioning stare.

"Well..." he allowed. "...that's probably true. A hundred



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Wardens held off the whole King's army for a year up there. But," he rallied his spirits. "It's full of history! Wardens like history, don't they?"

"Master Dryden," Bronwyn managed, in a long-suffering voice. "I am in the middle of a Blight, and Soldier's Peak is exactly in the middle of Highever and Amaranthine, an area currently controlled by the rebellious Arl Howe, who is responsible for the murder of my family. Somehow, I just can't see him giving me safe conduct so I can investigate an ancient haunted fortress." She cocked her head. "Can you?"

"Well... maybe not," the man admitted, crestfallen. "But someday..."

"It sounds very interesting," soothed Tara. "And we do like history, don't we, Jowan?"

"Yes!" Jowan, said, responding to the nudge. "We'd love to check it out. It would be great to explore an ancient fortress. How ancient is it?" he asked Bronwyn.

"Oh, it's old, all right. Pre-kingdom, pre-Cousland. I'm not saying it's not an intriguing prospect, Master Dryden, but I cannot not pursue it at the moment. I must return south this very day. However," she considered. "give me an address where I can contact you. If the matter of Arl Howe can be settled, we would then be able to travel there."

The merchant was mollified, and gave her the address of his family in Piper's Alley, where someone would always be home to take a message for him. Bronwyn shook her



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head in disbelief at the man's retreating back.

"A fortress..." Astrid said. "I wonder why Duncan did not pursue this matter? He was commander for the past twenty years, I understand? Do you suppose the place is a ruin?"

"I have no idea," Bronwyn told her. "I suppose that will always be a mystery. Perhaps Duncan thought it best to be close to the seat of power. At any rate, there's no way we can spare the time to go north, when the south is calling us so imperiously!"



The shadow of the sun had moved on, and all too soon it was time for the Wardens to move along as well. Bronwyn wanted to get back to the Compound in time to greet her young guests for the midday meal.

They arrived, dressed in their best, tutor in tow and puppy in basket. Formal introductions were made, and the boys tried hard to mind their manners, not peering too curiously at Astrid or the elves.

That out of the way, the boys ran about the Hall, exclaiming at the pictures and the weapon stands. The tutor did his best to keep small hands away from sharp edges. Killer was cooed over by Tara, who thought him "the cutest thing ever!" Scout greeted his young canine guest with a lick and nuzzle.

Corbus was proud that a Grey Warden had taken notice of his mabari, but was not quite pleased at the word "cute."

"He's going to be a great warrior someday. We'll fight

side by side, and nothing will stand against us as long as we're together!"

Scout and Killer barked approval, two octaves apart.

The boys, not too surprisingly, fastened on Jowan and Zevran, as the only men present, and followed them around, full of questions.

"— How many darkspawn have you killed?"

"— Were you *scared*?"

"— Do darkspawn stink? I heard they stink."

This from Lothar. Zevran assured him that they did. "Most horribly."

"— Is their blood black?"

"— Could I hold your sword?"

"— Is being a Grey Warden fun?"

"— Do you think the Blight will be over soon?"

"— Well, when *do* you think it'll be over?"

None of this was surprising, of course, but what Bronwyn had not anticipated was the tutor's shock at being expected to sit at a table with elves.

At first, she did not quite understand that sickly smile, or that disgusted expression. There was nothing at the table she need be ashamed of. The long table was clean and polished, and set with their best crockery and plate.

"I'm not sure... I didn't realize..." the man said, drawing her aside and whispering urgently.

"What is it?" Bronwyn said, wishing the man would spit it out, so they could get on with their meal. She needed to

see the Queen and leave Denerim before nightfall.

"Lady Werberga," he assured her, "would be very displeased to find out that the sons of the Arl of South Reach sat at a table... with *elves*. That elf over there is... I mean... look at those marks on her *face*! The dwarf lady, I suppose, is not so... Surely you understand? Surely you'll have the servants set up a separate table for the elves?"

"I understand," Bronwyn said, slowly and dangerously, "that my fellow Wardens would never respect me again if I treated them in such a shabby and cowardly fashion. I swore an oath to regard them as brothers and sisters, and I do not intend to break it to satisfy Lady Werberga. The boys are here to learn about Wardens. Well, the first thing that they will learn is that birth and race count for nothing among us."

It was not true, not completely true, and she knew it; but it *ought* to be true, and this anxious, self-important man needed to hear the truth as it should be.

"Come to the table, cousins," she called, putting out a hand to each boy. The tutor, panic-stricken, tried to remedy the situation as far as possible.

"Now then Corbus, sit down by the Commander — that's right. Lothar, I'm sure that gentleman," he gestured supplicatingly to the well-dressed Jowan, "would not object to keeping an eye on you. And I'll be between," He gave Bronwyn a quick, false smile that melted over his lips like pig grease. "I always sit in between, just to keep the boys from mischief. I'm sure you understand."



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"I want to sit by Bronwyn, too!" Lothar whined.

"Of course you shall," Bronwyn declared. "You're both honorary Wardens for the day: Corbus on my right and Lothar on my left." With a touch of perversity, she left everyone else to sort themselves out. All peoples of Thedas, by and large, were creatures of habit, and her companions sat as they usually did, indulgently making room for the children by Bronwyn. Danith scowled at Bronwyn, but not at the children, so it seemed unlikely that she would be unkind to them.

And so it proved, even though, with the unerring ability of children to embarrass their elders, they asked her all sorts of silly, ignorant, innocent questions, mostly about her facial tattoos, and if she really ate bad children.

That last came from young Lothar, and it made his tutor turn red and squeeze his eyes shut. Corbus dismissed it before Danith had a chance to form a reply.

"Of course, she doesn't, you silly git! She's a Grey Warden, and they're heroes. Everybody knows that!"

It was a particularly delicious meal, with Rannelly hovering proudly over her Wardens and the noble children. The boys, in fact, would have lingered too long, but Bronwyn gave the tutor a significant look. He was only too happy to escape such an uncomfortable situation, and flee back to the Bryland town house. Bronwyn kissed the boys, rather glad to have such likable young relations. No doubt the boys would tell their aunt and sister all about their new, socially unacceptable Grey Warden friends. She



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smirked, picturing Habren and Werberga's horror.

Nonetheless, they needed to be on their way. There were hours of daylight left before they must camp, and Bronwyn did not wish to spend an unnecessary night here, however comfortable she was. Indeed, it would not do to get too comfortable.

"I wish I were going with you," Jowan said quietly. "I mean... it may sound stupid... but I do. I'm not particularly brave, but I feel like I'm letting you down by staying here at the Compound. All I have to do is visit the Queen twice a day, after all, and read books that I'd enjoy reading anyway. I've never had so much freedom. I won't know what to do with myself."

"Don't be an idiot, Jowan," Tara said, squeezing his arm. "Somebody has to keep the Queen going. Who else is going to run the country? We'll send Wynne to replace you, and then you can come back to Ostagar."

Bronwyn herded them along, down the passage to the Palace proper. She threw Zevran a glance, wondering at the last moment if she should leave him, too, to guard Anora.

"Don't, Fair One," he murmured shaking his head. "I see what is on your mind. Do not leave me with the queen, for, beautiful as she may be, my place is with you. I am your sworn man, not hers."

"Zevran," Bronwyn told him quietly, pulling him a little ahead. "If anything happens to the Queen, my brother and I are as good as dead."



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"The attempt has failed, at least for the most part," said Zevran. "And you will need my blade when you go south, I am certain. Never leave me behind. It would be a mistake."

Anora did not keep them waiting. She had gifts for them: silver cloak pins with the Queen's personal insignia on them: a rose in the midst of brambles. They were gifts that she had on hand to give to those she favored, and they were very well-made. Even Danith could not object to wearing one.

"Your Majesty," Bronwyn said, "I thank you for myself and my companions." Briefly, she added the disturbing news from the Alienage. It was obvious that Tara and Danith would have liked her to say more about it, but Anora assured them she would look into the matter, and pass the news on to Teyrn Fergus.

Jowan cast his spells, and then it was time say farewell. They bowed their way out of the Little Audience Chamber, and hurried to the Compound.

Rannelly was nearly in tears, but had been amazingly efficient. Their bags and packs — all but Jowan's — were neatly arranged at the door, and the grooms had brought their horses. Straps were tightened and buckles done up, and even the new sword-wands were secured to Tara's horse.

"Here, Warden-Commander, dear," the housekeeper said, pressing another bag on Bronwyn. "A little something for the road."

Everyone had one, a little packet of something smelling of spice cookies and meat-and-mushroom pies. There were



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bows and curtsies... there were hugs and kisses. Jowan's eyes were red as he stood in the doorway, tall among the maidservants, and waved his farewells. He looked so forlorn that Bronwyn embraced him as a brother.

"You'll be fine," she insisted. "And you're doing what none of the rest of us can do. Aside from your research and hacking through the correspondence, which I simply did not have time to finish, this country will fall apart without the Queen. There would be chaos, and we cannot afford chaos in the midst of the Blight!"

"You heard the Commander," Tara said, hugging and kissing Jowan herself. "Stay out of trouble." She lowered her voice. "And be careful with knives!" She gave his shoulders a little shake and he nodded, miserably. "And eat a pastry for me tonight," she laughed, cuffing him.

He stayed at the door to the courtyard, waving as they clattered away, out of sight, out of hearing, on their way to adventures in the south. Mistress Rannelly put an arm around him.

"You'll be seeing them again soon, Warden dear."

"Not soon enough," he sighed, and went back to his reading.



CHAPTER 17

ON THE TRAIL
OF THE
WHITE WOLF

HE QUEEN RECEIVED SOME FAIRLY EARTHSHAKING LETTERS THE DAY AFTER WARDEN-COMMANDER BRONWYN

LEFT. It was a pity, really, that she was not still here, for she would have found them very interesting.

From her father came the news that Bann Vaughan was dead, killed by the darkspawn in bizarre circumstances. The fool and his fellow fools had gone up into the hills for some sort of drinking bout, and been gruesomely slaughtered. The Wardens had found the bodies while scouting.

Anora rebuked herself for the pleasure the news gave her. Vaughan's involvement in the plots against her was not fully established, and whatever he had done, he was now horribly dead. He was the only child of Arl Urien, who would be grief-stricken at the loss. She must find out if the Arl knew, and send him her condolences. She presumed that Urien would absorb the Bannorn of South Docklands back into his own titles. The tiniest smirk escaped her, picturing Habren Bryland's dismay at the overthrow of

her wedding plans. Anora disliked Lady Habren, with a roiling intensity she was perfectly able to mask. Habren managed to be both insipid and vicious, and was the worst sort of useless noble parasite. Bronwyn had been guarded in her talk, but Anora had gathered she felt the same about the Arl of South Reach's eldest child.

Father also told her at length about something Bronwyn had only touched on: the slaying of a High Dragon in the Korcari Wilds. Bronwyn, with commendable modesty, had not told her that she had been acclaimed as Dragonslayer before the captains of the army. Very distinguished. No, this creature was not the Archdemon, but was in fact Flemeth, the Witch of the Wilds, in her dragon form. Father himself knew the woman and had seen her transform. The battle had been fierce and protracted, and in terse but clear language he told her enough to grasp the violence of it. Now Flemeth's dragon remains were being put to good use by the armorers and tanners.

From Cailan she learned about the charms of the Dalish: most especially of the Dalish Keeper, by name Merrill. Cailan's descriptive powers were always most in evidence when describing other women, especially beautiful ones. It was impossible to tell if the elf woman had succumbed to Cailan's considerable charms or not; but Cailan clearly thought it inevitable.

Anora pushed the letter aside. She had always put up with Cailan's philandering ways, thinking them mean-

ingless in the context of their strong marriage – their strong friendship. Now that she knew that her marriage had become a sham – a sham that Cailan was busily trying to discard – this boasting was odious to her.

A little later, a courier from the north arrived, blurting out his message before he put the letter in her hands.

"Your Majesty! Arl Howe is dead, and Vigil's Keep has fallen to Teyrn Cousland!"

"And the Teyrn? He is unwounded?"

"Not a scratch, Your Majesty!"

Doors opened and closed. Anora sensed the news spreading through the Palace like a contagion, and from the Palace to Denerim as a whole. She nodded a dismissal to the courier, and broke the Highever seal, reading Fergus' message very carefully. From the first, it was clear that this was not the revenge he had wanted: not at all how he had wanted events to play out. The Crows! They were dangerous, of course: very dangerous. They had been commissioned by Howe to murder the Couslands, but had failed. And now Rendon Howe was dead by the very tools he had wished to use against others. A bitter irony, certainly, since it had led to the death of his children. A shame about Delilah. A cruel end for an innocent young woman, but Eleanor Cousland's death had also been cruel. Cruel, too, were the deaths of Fergus' wife and child. It was a relentlessly cruel world, after all. She sympathized with Fergus' regret and sorrow over the fate of the young

Howes. He was a good man. She glanced at her little music box, glad of the keepsake.

Still, Howe was gone and no longer a problem. Fergus was going after the remains of the rebels, and the north should be thoroughly pacified in short order. He had done well: very well indeed.

What was to be done with Amaranthine? She considered the matter. The arling was a prize: the richest by far of all Ferelden's arlings, not only because of its busy seaport, but because of its many mines and the fertile soil of the Feravel Plain; and because of the income generated from the many pilgrims who traveled both from Ferelden and from abroad to see the place from whence Andraste had left on the first Exalted March. If Bronwyn had not been a Grey Warden, it would have been likely that she would have been proposed for it, and thus a branch of the Couslands would rule there directly. There was the eldest son, Nathaniel, of course, sent away a few years ago for his education. Would Fergus accept him? Anora thought so, since he was so distressed by the murders of Thomas and Delilah Howe. Relations there were likely to be touchy for a generation or so, of course, and that would be tiresome.

Then she read the rest of the note, and sat down, thinking about it. It explained, in the ugliest of ways, the strange news Bronwyn had told her yesterday. The elves had been tricked into looking for "work," and had been instead sold to Tevinter slavers, and loaded just like cattle onto their ships.

The entire Highever Alienage? Howe must have made a fortune! No wonder he had been so intractably confident.

She must send a reliable man to the Alienage here for a tally of the lost. The elves would have to be informed, and she did not envy the one who carried the news. She would need to send in the Guard, in case of rioting. And there would be other consequences. People might scorn the elves, but many relied on their cheap labor, and this would be a blow to them.

Bann Esmerelle in the plot? What would they do about the city bannorn? Anora rolled her eyes, exasperated. It was inconceivable that Bann Esmerelle could remain in power after such a scandal. Not only that: for her complicity with Howe, she must certainly be executed.

A number of major fiefdoms were now empty, all within a few days. The Ferelden nobility was simply too thin on the ground, and those remaining were mostly a useless lot. An infusion of new blood would certainly be welcome. People might snipe at Father, rising from the earth to rule a teyrnir, but he had proven himself over and over. While the war was raging, vacant titles could be temporarily administered by stewards and seneschals and castellans; but when the Blight was over, there would be changes in Ferelden. Anora would see to it.

Esmerelle had closed the gates of Amaranthine to him, and was hiding behind them like a weasel in her lair.

Fergus Cousland studied the city. He could reduce it, cer-

tainly. He could smash the walls down and demolish the Keep. In so doing, he would destroy homes and businesses and helpless people who happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. And they probably didn't like Esmerelle, either.

Technically, Amaranthine was his city, anyway: the fiefdom of the vassal of one of his own vassals. He had not the least desire to spoil his own property. He rode up and down, outside the walls, while his forces dug into position. Anxious eyes followed him from the battlements above.

He called for the white flag of parley, and rode forward. A captain above the gate shouted down.

"My lord! Bann Esmerelle has been summoned, and will be here directly!"

"She'd better be!" Fergus shouted back without ceremony. "If she is not, then I'll speak to you and anyone else up there, just so you know what's coming if you do not open your gates!"

His temper rising, he raised his voice again.

"Rendon Howe is dead! Vigil's Keep has fallen! If that ancient fortress cannot keep me out, neither will your walls. Think hard, People of Amaranthine, before you defy your liege lord!"

"And I do not come only on my own behalf! I am here at the Queen's command. A blow struck against me, is struck against the Crown of Ferelden. Loose your arrows against me, and you name yourselves traitors and renegades! What is it to be? Will you save yourselves, your wives and families from the fury of my army, or will you defy me, and be destroyed?"

A tense silence. Fergus scanned the wall for activity. Some

messengers were hurrying along the catwalks at the top of the walls. One was rushing, crouched defensively, toward the captain at the gate. There was a muttered conference, and the captain uttered a loud, startled oath.

"What? Maker's Breath!"

More muttering. More men-at-arms were gathering by the captain. They sounded angry and... yes... frightened.

Fergus sat his horse, keeping himself steady and immovable. The focus had shifted away from him. Something was going on in the city, and the people were sorting it out themselves. The captain was coming back, head down. He looked defeated.

"Well?" Fergus demanded "Do you yield?"

"My lord," the captain said, in anguished misery. "We yield, and most humbly implore your mercy. Amaranthine is yours. Bann Esmerelle is gone. We believe it possible that she took ship on the dawn tide. She is gone, and her household servants and guards with her. Another ship, carrying some Tevinter associates of hers, has just left the docks as well."

Fergus digested this. Yes, he had feared this, but it was only thing for Esmerelle to do, really. Her days as a Fereldan noblewoman — in *Ferelden*, at least — were done.

In a cold, level voice, he said, "Then open your gates. Open your gates *at once*. I am sending a detail to the docks and commanding them to impound every ship there. No one leaves until I have examined their cargo. For gold and power, Bann Esmerelle and Rendon Howe have loosed Tevinter sla-

vers amongst you, and no man, woman, or child is safe!"

That got a reaction, and none too soon. The great gates swung open, and the city guard lined up on either side, bowing in submission. Townspeople crowded close behind them. There were some scattered cheers for "the Good Teyrn!"

Fergus and his knights clattered through, and down the long stone steps leading to the market. He trotted past the empty stalls — for the merchants had prudently hid their goods and their persons — and then beyond to the towers and the other long stairs that led up to the docks.

Not two miles away, he could see a ship standing out from the harbor, sails billowing. Tevinter. There was no way on earth to stop them now.

After some delay, they were able to find, not the harbormaster, but one of his assistants. He at least could find the shipping manifests, and he and some other loungers could tell them what had happened.

Pointing to the departing vessel, the assistant gabbled, "That's Master Caladrius' ship. Very important man, Master Caladrius. He and the Arl were like this," the man gestured, two fingers together.

"Tevinter ships have been coming and going for months, my lord," another man put in, trying to ingratiate himself with the new regime. "Very busy, like."

"Is that true?" Fergus demanded.

"True, my lord. Tevinters have been in and out of here for months, my lord," the assistant gabbled, very intimi-

dated by the big man and his big friends. "The wagons pulled up, and the cargo was loaded, quick as quick. We was paid not to talk about it."

Fergus eyed the man is disgust. "The "cargo" was elves, wasn't it? The Tevinters were slavers, and you helped them abduct free Fereldans!"

"Well, what was we to do, my lord?" the assistant squawked. "The Arl said we had to, and the Bann said we had to, and Captain Chase would just as soon kill a man as look at him, and if we gave trouble, they might turn us over to Master Caladrius! And we'd end up like – well, you come over here and see, my lord..."

The men led them to the end of the Long Pier. From a distance, Fergus recognized what it must be.

A young boy, no more than eleven or twelve was stretched out there. His delicate elven face was pearly pale under the dirt and dried tears. Blood still pooled at his wrists and ankles from ritual cuts.

The assistant muttered. "Master Caladrius learned you was coming, my lord. He needed a wind."

Frustration, horror, fury: all swelled in his heart until he thought it would burst.

"Did he get them all?"

"All? Well...no, my lord. Wasn't room for all them. No time to get another ship, either. There's some cargo left in the West Warehouse..."

Not much, really. What "cargo" were left behind were the

sick and old, and to Fergus' distress, the very small children – even an infant, torn from her more valuable mother's arms. Without anyone to nurse the child, she would starve.

Fergus turned to one of his men. "Find that child a wet nurse."

The man grimaced. He did not mean to be cruel, but facts were facts. "It'll be hard, my lord, finding a woman who'll nurse an elfling."

"Then buy a she-goat and a nursing-tit! The elves can keep the goat, anyway. I think I'm good for the coin."

The elves were not particularly grateful for their rescue. They were too traumatized and terrified for that. They shrank back in their cages, away from Fergus and the other men in armor, expecting new horrors. There were unhealed cuts on many of them, as well.

"Are you from Denerim?" Fergus asked. The elves stared at him in blank incomprehension. He repeated, "Are you from the Denerim Alienage? Or from Highever?"

A scrawny old elf licked his lips, and croaked. "Denerim, my lord. Denerim."

"I'll have you returned there in one of the wagons," Fergus said. "Seyton, arrange it."

"Yes, my lord."

An haggard old woman wailed, "But what about Maia? What about Maia and Kirri? We can't leave without them!"

Fergus gave a few more orders and stalked back out into the sunlight, away from that hopeless misery. He'd remember to check about the goat, anyway. The Tevinter

ship was a fading dot in the distance now. They were getting away: they were getting away clean with their victims, and there was nothing he could do about it.

Esmerelle had got away clean, too. She had slipped away at dawn, leaving her city to its fate.

Fergus wandered through the bann's mansion, kicking at the litter of papers and trash: the remains after the woman had packed everything she wanted for her own use. Nothing of value was left here. Unlike Vigil's Keep, where the treasury of the Howes was left for Fergus, Esmerelle had planned her escape and executed it neatly. Drag marks in the dust showed where a heavy chest had been removed from a store room. Her chosen favorites had removed their own belongings, too. From what the remaining servants could tell, the traitors had dressed plainly and fled in the quiet before dawn.

Seyton bent over to retrieve a forgotten silk scarf. "We can but hope, my lord, that the captain of the ship she escaped in is as lacking in honor and decency as the lady, and throws her and her lackeys over the side before robbing her!"

Fergus liked the idea. All sorts of hazards could doom Esmerelle: treachery, as Seyton suggested; storms, pirates, Qunari, or another Tevinter slave ship. He snorted. He had heard that Tevinters had not the least compunction about enslaving humans when they had the chance. Beings without magic were nothing and nobody in the Tevinter Empire. If not a slave, then a servant or a peasant, certainly. With a great deal of pleasure, Fergus imagined

Esmerelle there, chained beside the elves she had betrayed.

However, real life was never so just. She would very likely make the journey successfully, and live long and happily off the gold earned from the slave trade. In the Free Marches, no one would care, as long as she was rich enough.

"Enough of that bitch!" he snarled stalking toward her study. The city was in confusion: several major officials, including the chief constable of the city guard, had left with the Bann. He would have to move quickly, create a working city government, and return this place to a semblance of normality. He had no idea how many of Rendon Howe's loyalists had remained in the arling. The forces the king had granted Fergus here had been enough to deal with the worst of the rebels, but was not enough to manage the arling on a permanent basis.

He was rooting out people like the Packtons and the Temmerleys. They had colluded with Howe in the attack on Highever, and their lands were forfeit, as were many of their lives. While he would not visit vengeance on the children, he would not give them a way to fight against him in the future. They would be sent to the Chantry, or they could be sent to relatives abroad, but they would hold no land from him ever again. Many fiefdoms and estates would be vacant and idle.

He needed more men: reliable men. It would be best to find capable people with no ties to Amaranthine, who would look only to him for patronage.

Even if Nathaniel came home and the Landsmeet con-

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firmed him as arl, Fergus decided that he wanted to put his own man – or woman, for that matter – in as city bann. Amaranthine's bann had great power, with control over the splendid harbor and its lucrative trade. A faithful city bann could counterbalance a hostile arl to a great degree.

Howe's remaining militia he would round up and send down to Ostagar, where they could do good service, and not cause trouble in their homeland. His own troops were still looking for the Crow assassins: all ships wanting to leave the harbor would be carefully scrutinized.

Esmerelle's study looked like it had been swept up in a whirlwind. On the writing table, sealing wax puddled thickly, while spilled ink pooled like old blood. Papers littered the floor. More had been burned in the fireplace. A few of those, edges crisped black, were crumpled on the hearth.

"See what you can salvage there," he ordered. "and have someone fetch my camp desk."

Her private chamber adjoined. Fergus glanced in. It looked even worse than the study. A great deal of the furniture had been taken – though not the great bed, which would have required a dozen men and a great commotion to shift. The linens were gone, of course, but Fergus was not feeling particularly fussy. The featherbed there looked thick and comfortable. He shrugged, and returned to the study, rummaging through the writing desk.

Esmerelle had taken the seal of the City of Amaranthine, the tawdry cow. He would have a new one devised:

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one as different as possible from the old. Yes, a new seal... a new coat of arms... a new day for Amaranthine.

Still, it was fortunate that Rendon Howe had been wearing his seal ring when he was killed. Fergus wore it now, along with the seal of Highever stolen from his father by his murderer.

"I'll leave a small garrison here for now," he decided, "and we must move on to Highever." Sitting down at Esmerelle's writing table, he wrote a letter to the Queen to that effect.

Danith had been given directions to the hunting grounds Zathrian's clans used at this time of year. It was good thing, or Bronwyn would have wandered in the Brecilian forest for some time. Instead, they were there in two days.

A trio of Dalish elves stepped out of the trees, bows at the ready. "*Andaran atish'an*, cousin," said the leader, a slender blonde elven woman in hunting leathers. "I am Mithra, of the clan of Zathrian. You are of the clan of Marethari, are you not?" Her face hardened at the sight of Bronwyn. "And how is that you travel with a shemlen?" She paused, and her eyes swept Astrid with aloof disdain, "and a durgen'len?"

Bronwyn took a breath, but kept silent after all. The question was clearly addressed to Danith. To interrupt would no doubt be as offensive to these elves as it would be in a similar situation among humans.

Danith answered calmly. "I am a Grey Warden, Danith Mahariel of Clan Marethari. This is Bronwyn, Com-

mander of the Wardens. With us are Wardens Tara and Astrid, and this is our companion, Zevran Aranai. Our commander wishes to speak to your Keeper."

Bronwyn gave her a nod. "Greetings, Mithra. May we be taken to Keeper Zathrian?"

The two elves behind Mithra grimaced in distaste. One spat on the ground. Mithra stared at Bronwyn, and then at Scout. After a moment, she shrugged.

"*Ma nuvenin*," she said. "But remember, shemlen, that our arrows will find you if you prove treacherous."

Bronwyn had no idea what "*ma nuvenin*" meant, but it seemed to imply acquiescence. She signed to her comrades to dismount, and swung down from Posy. Leading their horses, they followed the Dalish guards to a clearing.

"Tie your beasts here," Mithra said sharply. "We do not want their filth soiling our camp. And you must clean up after your dog."

Scout stiffened with outrage. He was a mabari, not some sort of careless wild beast who relieved himself anywhere and everywhere. These people lived outside. Why would they care? Bronwyn looked at him, and he forebore to growl. These elves were un-friends, but his Bronwyn wished to try to talk to them. Scout sniffed the air, and then licked her hand and looked up her anxiously.

This place is bad. It smells bad. It is sick and wrong.

His Bronwyn was clever, and understood. She rubbed his ears, whispering. "We'll be very careful, Scout."

This camp was much like that of Danith's clan, on the surface; yet there were fewer elves in evidence. Some tiny elven children peered out from behind trees, whispering and pointing at Scout, eyes wondering and fearful. The landships stood silent, and down in a paddock, the halla bleated mournfully. Closed faces peered her way, as they approached the Keeper. Bronwyn had heard that this elf was old; but while entirely bald, which was unusual for an elf, the face was unlined, and the straight and slender form radiated energy and power.

"Keeper, our cousin says that she is a Grey Warden," declared Mithra. With a gesture at Bronwyn, she added, "She said that this shemlen is their leader. I thought it best to bring them to you at once."

"You have done well. You may return to your duties." The Keeper studied Bronwyn a moment and said, "I am Zathrian, the keeper of this clan, its guide, and preserver of our ancient lore."

"Greetinga to you, Zathrian," Bronwyn replied with a nod. "I am Bronwyn, Commander of the Grey in Ferelden." Briefly she introduced her companions. Zathrian was warm only with Danith, but to Tara and Zevran he was at least civil.

"Your errand is no surprise to me. I have already sensed the growing corruption in the south. I would have already taken my clan further north," he told her, "but events intervened. You are here, I am sure, because the treaties we signed ages ago. Unfortunately..."

And then he began to explain why his clan would not be able to fulfill their obligations. There was sickness in the clan. The majority of the hunters and trackers were suffering from the effect of a curse.

"A curse?" Bronwyn asked. "What kind of curse?"

Tara wanted to know as well. It would unthinkably rude to imply that she could do more than the venerable Keeper of a Dalish clan, but she had a feeling Zathrian was not being very forthcoming. She knew – from knowing Danith – that the Dalish were clannish and close-mouthed about their own business.

Zathrian said, "Come with me."

Within the circle of landships, they were shown a score or so of elves on cots, obviously very ill. A curse, Zathrian repeated. An ancient curse in the forest, now directed against his clan. More were falling ill every day. Many had already died.

"The clan came here one month ago, as is our custom this time of year. We did not expect the werewolves to ambush us."

"Werewolves?" Bronwyn bit back her wonder and disbelief. Werewolves were supposed to be extinct: a danger long past, due in part to the heroism of her own ancestors.

"Indeed. Even with all our magic their curse lies heavy on us. If this continues, we may lose many more of our own people. Do not think I discount the danger of the danger of the darkspawn. The Blight is an evil which must be stopped. However, in our current situation, we have no aid to give you."

"You have hit on no way to help your people?" Bronwyn asked.

"The affliction is a curse in the blood, which must end either in an agonizing death or in a transformation to a monstrous creature. There is a way.." he paused, his large elven eyes assessing Bronwyn, "but it would be no trivial task."

Bronwyn sighed inwardly, remembering King Bhelen and the Anvil of the Void. There was no way she was committing herself to such an effort here. She kept her face perfectly blank. "I see."

"Within the Brecilian Forest is a great wolf named Witherfang. It was within him that the curse originated. If he were killed and his heart brought to me, perhaps I might have the power to lift the curse."

"You know of this creature?"

A curious expression crossed the old elf's face. "I have... seen him. Days ago I sent hunters after Witherfang. None have returned. I dare not risk any more of my own people."

"How did this curse begin?" Tara asked, trying to think of anything she had read about lycanthropy.

Zathrian granted her a patronizing smile. "That is a long story, and one which matters little now. Perhaps Sarel or Lanaya, my First, could tell you, if you are at leisure. I fear I have not the time for old tales."

Bronwyn felt her scalp prickle.

He's hiding something.

She cleared her throat. "Where is this Witherfang to be found, do you suppose?"

He raised his gaze to the skies above, thinking. "In the river south of here there is a small island. Wolf tracks and spoor have been found there. The creatures lair nearby. If they are anywhere, that is the place more likely. The old hunter's trail will take you there. Mithra can show you."

Bronwyn glanced briefly at her people, who were listening with interest. Danith looked ready to go on the hunt immediately. Tara was lost in thought. Bronwyn was hoping she could come up with some other sort of magical cure. Zevran and Astrid were impassive. Bronwyn thought it likely that they suspected, as she did, that there was more going on here than Zathrian intimated.

"You said," she ventured, "that 'perhaps' the curse could be lifted. You are not sure?"

Zathrian shook his head. "There are no guarantees, but that is the only way imaginable."

Bronwyn stood studying him a moment, thinking it over.

It was tempting, very tempting, simply to turn her back on this man and head straight for Ostagar. There was some mystery here, and these people wanted something substantial from her without fully explaining what it was or why. Could she justify going off on a hunt for a magical white wolf and a band of creatures that were supposed to be extinct? She had business in Ostagar and a letter for Loghain from the Queen.

She said to Zathrian, "If you will excuse me, I must speak with my companions." She gestured to them, and

withdrew into the privacy of a stand of oaks.

"This is certainly not what I expected. These people have troubles of their own, and with the losses from the curse, will probably not be able to assist us in any significant way."

"You are thinking of leaving them like this!" Danith said angrily. "You are eager to help others, but not the Dalish!"

"That's unfair, Danith!" Tara protested. "That man is not telling us the whole story."

"That is certainly true," Bronwyn agreed grimly. "I did think of leaving, Danith, but I have a duty to raise all the forces I can against the Blight. Had the Keeper not given me clear directions to where I can find Witherfang, I would leave, for we do not have the time to blunder through the forest, looking for cursed monsters. We will camp tonight, and first thing in the morning, we will see what we can discover, but I cannot promise to spend an unlimited amount of time helping these people."

She stalked back to Zathrian, and said, "We shall make camp and at daybreak set out to search for this Witherfang. We shall leave our horses, if that does not inconvenience you."

"As you wish," Zathrian shrugged. "And now, I have much to do. My first, Lanaya, can assist you as you deem necessary." He moved away, cat-footed, his feet hardly making a sound.

Lanaya was a very pretty young woman: blonde, with dainty features. Not surprisingly, she revered the Keeper, telling them she had been his apprentice, and had spent the past few years studying under him.

"If it is not too impolite," she said, hesitantly, "I have a question..."
 "Yes?" Bronwyn asked, trying very hard to control her impatience.

"Do your people ever regret what they did to ours?"

Bronwyn paused. Did Lanaya mean humans in general? *Did* humans regret that the Tevinter Imperium had destroyed Arlathan, the ancient seat of the elves? Did humans regret the fall of the Dales to the Chantry's Exalted March? Did they regret that elves were now a race of servants? They were now hewers of wood and drawers of water – or vagrants living in the woods, as most people regarded the Dalish. Taken all in all, humans had done a great deal to the elves – all of it fairly horrible. Before Bronwyn had become a Warden and set off on her travels, she had never thought about it at all. It was something that she learned in lessons about people long ago about whom she knew nothing. She had not even thought it very relevant, when compared with the importance of learning recent Orlesian history. Elves were there, and they were servants, and that was the way the world was. Bronwyn felt no more responsible for their fate than she did for the betrayal of Andraste. However, such an answer would probably not be the most tactful at the moment.

"Some do," she said quietly. "Not all humans are the same."

Danith snorted. Tara nudged her.

Lanaya only looked sad.

"It is difficult for our people to accept that so many humans

feel no guilt or sorrow. A poet once wrote of them, before the fall of the Dales: *'Like Dragons they fly, glory upon wings. Like dragons they savage, fearsome pretty things.'*"

Bronwyn was rather taken aback at the idea of being compared to a dragon. "That sounds like a description of the old Tevinter magisters, who were indeed fearsome. Most humans are just people trying to make a living and get along, and are neither glorious or savage, nor even very pretty."

Lanaya sighed and managed a smile. "Forgive me," she said. "You must have questions of your own."

"Your Keeper is a very interesting man. Could you tell me more about him?"

This subject Lanaya liked very much: and waxed lyrical about Zathrian's venerable wisdom and his utter devotion to the Dalish. "He is a compassionate man: a man who has suffered and lost much."

"Really?" Bronwyn queried mildly, "What has he lost? Do tell me," she persuaded. "I do not wish to hurt or offend him unnecessarily."

"Well," Lanaya began, "he lost his family – a very long time ago. I don't know the full story, but I understand the circumstances were horrific."

"Were they attacked by werewolves?" Zevran asked. Bronwyn shared a glance with him.

"No – oh, no..." Lanaya shook her head. "I am sure they were not. The werewolves are a very recent trouble to us."

"Thank you, Lanaya," Bronwyn said. "We shall make camp



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nearby and set out at first light tomorrow. I have already informed the Keeper that we shall leave our horses here."

"Yes...your horses." Lanaya looked beyond to the clearing where they were tied. "I have not seen many horses. They are not as beautiful as halla, but they too are gifts of the Creators. May I look at them?"

"Be careful of them," Danith said. "They are useful beasts, but quick-tempered and violent." She threw Bronwyn a look of thinly veiled cynism, clearly implying "*Much like their human masters.*"

"My horse is gentle," Tara suggested. "it's the smaller one with the white mark on her face and the white stockings."

Astrid had been silent up to now, listening very carefully. She felt uncomfortable and out of place here, but she still could spot someone lying, even by omission. This Keeper fellow was indeed hiding things. Was there something shameful about this curse? Some detail he did not want them to know? Perhaps it wasn't simply Dalish secrecy.

Zevran too was silent, eyes flicking around the camp, remembering clearly why his brief sojourn among the Dalish had been such a failure. The clannishness, the utter lack of privacy, the conformity – the lack of wine, easy women, and good fish chowder: all of them were reasons to flee this place as he would the lair of darkspawn. It puzzled him that Danith, who had now seen other ways of living – ways that Zevran much preferred – clung to her traditions so fiercely.



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They set up their tents on the outskirts of the Dalish camp. Scout stayed close to Bronwyn. These beings were unused to dogs, and Scout sensed they were curious and frightened, and the adults hostile. With a show of indifference, he trotted at Bronwyn's heels, and then sprawled near their fire, watching Zevran prepare supper, snapping up the tidbits that the elf threw him.

Later, as it grew dark, a young girl came by to invite them sit with them and listen to the hahren's stories.

Bronwyn was not sure she was included in the invitation, but the elf girl seemed to think so. She and Astrid shrugged at each other, and followed their elvish companions. Keeper Marethari's camp seemed cosmopolitan and friendly in comparison, but surely there was nothing amiss in hearing stories.

Except that this clan really was very rude and antagonistic. Astrid they ignored, just as if she did not exist at all. Bronwyn knew that she was offended, but the dwarf woman was too shrewd and too self-assured to show her opinion of her present company. She sat behind the rest, by Scout, and stroked the dog's shining coat. Scout was a fine creature, and not too proud to make friends with her.

Bronwyn would have preferred to be ignored, too. Alas, since she towered over everyone in the camp, all eyes were upon her, and she was a target for Dalish grievances. Hard looks were thrown her way, and hard words as well.

She tried to be reasonable and pleasant, but it was clearly not working. And then the hahren, by name Sarel, began his story, and that did not help at all, either.

SAREL'S TALE

In shemlen lands, you will hear tales of the woman Andraste. They name her prophet, and bride of their Maker. But we knew her as a war leader, one who, like us, had been a slave and dreamed of liberation. We joined her rebellion against the Imperium, and our heroes died beside her, unmourned, in Tevinter bonfires. She was betrayed by her own husband, but not by Thane Shartan, the leader of the elves. He, too, perished, hoping for a better world.

We stayed with our so-called allies until the war ended. Our reward: A land in southern Orlais called the Dales. So we began the Long Walk to our new home.

Halamshiral, "the end of the journey," was our capital, built out of the reach of the humans. We could once again forget the incessant passage of time. Our people began the slow process of recovering the culture and traditions we had lost to slavery.

But it was not to last. Orlais grew: the shemlen multiplied and spread to the south. The Chantry first sent missionaries into the Dales, and then, when those were thrown out, templars. We were driven from Halamshiral, scattered. Some took refuge in shemlen cities, living in squalor, tolerated only a little better than vermin.

We took a different path. We took to the wilderness, never

stopping long enough to draw the notice of our shemlen neighbors. In our self-imposed exile, we keep what remains of elven knowledge and culture alive.

Tara spoke carefully. "I have read that the elves were not without fault when the troubles started that led to the Exalted March."

Sarel raised an elegant brow.

He replied, "Oh, I am certain we played a part in our downfall. We believed that the shemlen would not revoke their prophet's gift so lightly. We were wrong. They took our lands, forcing us to abandon our gods and live as beggars in shemlen cities. I have heard that Halamshiral still stands, and in it there is an Alienage. I wonder if the irony amuses the shemlen, or if they have forgotten that they did not build the city they rule themselves."

Danith quoted, her voice low and fervent, "*We are the Dalish: keepers of the lost lore, walkers of the lonely path. We are the last elvhen. Never again shall we submit.*"

There was a rumble of assent. Everyone stared accusingly at Bronwyn again. She was not pleased to be challenged about her actions of seven hundred years before. Zathrian was smiling faintly, eyes half-closed. Bronwyn considered bringing up a major grievance that helped launch the Exalted March against them. It was, of course, the elves' isolationist refusal to participate in the war against the Second Blight; a refusal that climaxed in the

elves watching from a distance as the entire city of Montsimmard was destroyed. It was useless, of course, and would only exacerbate the elves' hostility to her.

Trying to be diplomatic, she said only, "The Grey Wardens have the greatest respect for their Dalish allies, and for their Dalish brothers and sisters."

There was little else to say, unless she was to point out that she had not been there and had not driven any elves from their land. However, how could she deny that she, as a human noble, had benefited from the destruction of the elven homeland? Very likely elves had once ruled in what was now Highever. Saying anything would probably only provoke a quarrel. She must keep to her mission. Becoming angry and combative would not gather allies against the Blight.

Zevran, however, had quite a bit to say in her support. "If I may, I would like to point out that our Commander was not born until the Dragon Age, and that her ancestors are Ferelden, and so did not take part in the Exalted March in Orlais."

"She doesn't even *like* the Orlesians!" Tara muttered angrily. "She's never been anything but kind to me, and she saved me from the Templars. She saved Danith's life, too! Did you tell them about *that*, Danith?"

"My life, as well," Zevran pointed out. "I certainly have not forgotten it."

There was a long, uncomfortable silence, broken by Lanaya. She said softly, "Of course, we hope you do not

take this story personally. We certainly would not wish to be inhospitable to a Grey Warden, who endures so much for the good of all, and of whom, I understand, our Keeper has requested a difficult and dangerous service."

The mutterings subsided – grudgingly – and Bronwyn bade them goodnight, feeling she had put up with quite enough criticism for the actions of the Orlesians and the Chantry for one night.

Astrid joined her, flashing a grimace. "Dalish hospitality, indeed," she murmured. "All things considered, I would rather be at the Warden Compound!"

Bronwyn smiled briefly. "As would I, my friend."

They moved out at daybreak without much conversation. Thinking hard while she helped feed and water the horses, Bronwyn decided that she would have to have it out with Danith eventually, but this was not the time or place. They had a wolf to hunt. They left the horses behind, hoping that nothing unfortunate would befall them, and traveled on foot.

Past the camp, the forest closed in: dense, humid, emerald green. In places, Bronwyn had to use her sword to clear the way.

It was old, that forest: watchful and not easily comprehended. Danith took the lead, her footfalls soundless on the thick soft floor of decayed vegetation. Generations of trees had strewn their leaves and dead branches here, and all of it had melded into the foundations of the earth itself.

Astrid grimaced at the feel of it under her boots. It was

not honest stone. It was yielding and cloying. It smelled like something alive: like the soft corruption one sometimes found in the Deep Roads. It was not tainted, certainly, but it was alien to her nature. It reminded her unpleasantly of the time she had stepped on a nug in the dark.

"A strange place," she whispered to Bronwyn.

The human did not disagree. "I have never been in such an odd forest," she whispered. "I do not recognize some of the trees. You can tell by the size of them that they are extremely old. The lumbermen of Gwaren and South Reach must not come here. That black silkleaf, for example," she pointed out a thick-trunked tree with rough bark and glossy dark leaves, "is very valuable. A bed made from it would cost a hundred sovereigns in Denerim. Only a wealthy noble could afford such furniture."

Astrid eyed the tree with more respect. All wood, it seemed was not the same.

Faintly in the distance there was a deep groaning, like the creaking of frozen branches in winter. Danith paused, poised in mid-step, her head swiveling at the sound. The others fell silent.

"What is that?" Bronwyn asked softly.

"Hush!" Danith hissed. "It is something we do not wish to meet. Do not stray from the path!"

She moved on, hand brushing back an overhanging vine, peering into the green tunnel before them.

"It's very pretty," Tara murmured to Zevran. "Isn't it? I

like the green light coming through the leaves. It's like the colored glass in the windows at the Circle Tower."

"Be cautious," Danith told them, leading the way. "Here there are trees... that are unfriendly..."

"Unfriendly?" Astrid asked. "How can trees be unfriendly?"

"Unfriendly trees?" Tara echoed. "That doesn't sound good."

"Sylvans," Danith murmured, looking about carefully. "Sometimes they... awaken." In a low voice she described them. "Oval leaves, narrow shape, Sometimes..." she confided. "Their trunks are double."

"Double?" asked Bronwyn. "I'm not sure I understand you."

"Like... legs."

"These trees... walk?" Bronwyn managed.

"So it has been told."

"Walking trees?" Tara said. "This entire forest thing is much more peculiar than I expected. What's *that*?"

Danith picked up the rank scent, and had barely time to turn her head, when the bear burst out of the woods, raging. Scout bayed a defiance, and rushed to meet it, teeth bared. Bronwyn's sword was already out. Tara uttered a short, sharp cry, before raising her new staff to freeze the beast. Zevran dove past her, running up behind.

The bear was too furious to be stopped so easily. It hurtled toward Danith, slowed but not halted. The elf loosed an arrow and then another: quick, straight flashes through the green light.

Astrid thought it was rather like a bronto, but with

more hair. She struck her shield with the flat of her blade, and shouted. The bear was briefly distracted from the archer, and roared with pain as gashes opened in its flank and black. Rearing up, it towered over them. Scout darted in, startling it, while arrow struck and sword blade cut.

It had claws! Astrid discovered, and yellowed fangs, which gnashed at her face. Flecks of red foam burst from the bear's throat with every roar. Crackles of energy spurted from Tara's staff. Burnt fur smoked, turning the air thick and grey.

One of Danith's arrows found its throat, and Bronwyn's sword pierced its heart. It thrashed violently, pulling Zevran off his feet, and then rolled over, trembled, and was still.

"Is that a bear?" Astrid asked. "I have seen pictures of them. A black bear?"

"Yes," Danith said, extending her hand over the dead mass of fur and flesh. "A black he-bear." She murmured a quick blessing in elvish. "I have made peace with its spirit. It fought bravely against great odds."

Astrid was still curious. "Do people eat them? Dwarves eat brontos, and these are also large and fierce."

"Yes," Danith answered shortly. "They are nourishing. It would be courteous to tell the clan of this, that the children eat well. It is not hot today. Perhaps we can bring some of the meat back with us later. I can quickly dress it and wrap it in a part of the hide. If I place it up in a tree branch, it should be all right for some hours."

Bronwyn and Zevran helped her, to move the work along faster. After all, they might want some themselves that night. Astrid watched in interest and Tara in mild horror. They finished, and resumed their tracking.

The sun was overhead, when they stopped briefly to rest. The air was mild and still, heavy with moisture. Bronwyn felt a little drowsy, and resented having to get up and continue. There was no help for it, though.

Danith moved ahead, scouting, studying the ground, bending to look and smell. After awhile she made a soft sound of disgust.

"The creatures are very close. They passed this way before noon."

It was not long before they met them. They were not darkspawn, but they were very frightening indeed. Three of them rushed out into a glassy spot on their little island. Instead of instantly attacking, they stopped, and one raised a... claw. It was exactly like a man gesturing to be allowed to speak.

Werewolves were thought to be extinct, and that was what her tutor Aldous had assured Bronwyn, when as a little girl she had been distressed by tales of the Lycanthrope Plague during the Black Age. Haelia Cousland had raised a warband that had faced and slaughtered the creatures, driving the survivors into the Hafter River to drown. What the old tales did not make clear was how *big* werewolves were. Nor was Bronwyn prepared for how horribly

man-like they seemed, as they slouched along on two legs.

And then the beast in the lead spoke. No story had ever warned her of talking werewolves. Even Scout was startled. The voice was deep and distorted, but it certainly spoke in words, and the words expressed sentient thought.

"The watchwolves spoke truly, my brothers and sisters," it growled. "The Dalish, a human, and a dwarf, come to seek revenge.. come to put us in our place.." The creature's fellows answered him with growls and snarls.

After a thunderstruck moment, Bronwyn said carefully, "I had not expect to speak with you." She gripped her sword more tightly. "It was my understanding that werewolves were mindless beasts.."

A coughing bark. "We *are* beasts!" Yellow eyes glared into hers. "But we are neither simple nor mindless. We have names! I am Swiftrunner. I lead my cursed brothers and sisters! Go back to the Dalish, and tell them they have failed! Tell them that we will gladly watch them suffer as we have suffered. It is time for them to pay for what they have done!"

Things were obviously far more complicated than Zathrian had told her. Indeed, he had told her nothing important. These were thinking creatures, and they clearly thought themselves wronged.

"What have the Dalish done to anger you? Tell me more of this matter," she said, trying to look interested, and not intimidated. "We are not a hirelings of the Dalish," Bronwyn explained. "but Grey Wardens. We came here to enlist

the aid of the Dalish against the Blight, and they said they were too weakened by your attacks to fulfill their obligations. I am here to talk and to see if some agreement can be reached. Can there not be a truce between you until the darkspawn are defeated?"

Her words pleased only Tara, Zevran, and Astrid. Danith was infuriated, and the werewolves unconvinced.

Swiftrunner snarled at her. "We care nothing for your Blight! We kill the darkspawn when we find them. Our quarrel is with the Dalish. They cursed us, and thought to escape revenge. A Dalish hunter stands at your side. Do not think to trick us!"

Bronwyn lifted her left hand in a peaceful gesture. "I am not seeking to trick you, but to understand. Tell me of this curse you suffer."

A chorus of growls. "You know nothing, do you!" Swiftrunner barked. "Nothing of the curse, and nothing of those you serve. We are done talking. Run to the Dalish, and tell them they are doomed!" The werewolf crouched, turning his back. "Come, brothers and sisters! Leave them to the forest. It will deal with intruders as it always has!"

"Wait!" Bronwyn shouted. "I don't understand!"

Angry silence. "There is much more here than meets the eye," Astrid said. "These creatures are cursed and they blame the Dalish. Did the Dalish cast the curse on them first?"

Tara looked uneasy. "Zathrian didn't *tell* us that the Dalish cast the curse first..."

"No," Zevran smirked. "He did not. He was, remember, very evasive about its origin. Perhaps they cursed an enemy and got more than they bargained for."

"Why would my people do that?" Danith demanded hotly.

"We don't know, do we?" Astrid answered. "Could these werewolves have been a rival clan? Perhaps they were quarrelling over territory. All speaking peoples do that."

"I cannot believe that any elf would curse another in such a way," Danith protested. "Perhaps these creatures were wolves to begin with. Whatever happened, they must have deserved it!"

"Well, we won't know," Bronwyn said coldly, "until we find out a great deal more. Perhaps I can persuade them to tell me all about it. Zathrian might have told me that the creatures can speak and reason! Scout, track them!"

They followed at cautious speed, through bracken, up hill and down. They found more traces: trampled undergrowth and droppings.

"The air is different up ahead," Danith whispered, narrowing her eyes. "We are close." She sniffed the air. "Something is foul here. Something strange." Scout growled softly.

Tara muttered, "Something stranger than *walking trees*?"

Bronwyn pushed another branch aside, and stepped into a wide clearing. A huge expanse of ruins loomed ahead.

"Look at that!" Tara marveled.

They were quite impressive. An circular central structure rose up in a dome. Wings stretched out on other side,

symmetrical and ornate. Even choked by the forest, it was a magnificent structure.

"Are those ruins Tevinter?" Astrid asked quietly. "I had not read they penetrated this far east."

"Not Tevinter," Bronwyn said under her breath. "There are Tevinter ruins all over the north. I've visited half a dozen in Highever and Amaranthine. We've all seen Ostagar. This is nothing like that."

Tara was wide-eyed with wonder and excitement. "Could they be elvish? Could this be something from the days of the elves before... everything happened?"

"It's very impressive," Zevran granted judiciously. "Quite... beautiful." He asked Danith, "Have you been here before?"

"Never," Danith replied, studying the ruins with some unease. "No one comes this deep into the forest."

Bronwyn stopped and said, "That's... not entirely true."

The werewolf Swiftrunner rose up from the undergrowth and stood tall, silhouetted against the ruins. His muzzle was thrust forward in a snarl. Around him, other mighty forms emerged. The werewolves were out in force.

Swiftrunner roared, "Still you come! You are stronger than we could have imagined. The Dalish chose well. But you do not belong here, outsider. Leave this place!"

Bronwyn said, "You suffer from a curse. The Dalish are suffering from a curse. The same curse. You want the same thing, surely? To end this curse? Let me see if I can resolve this dispute, and find a way to help all of you!"



THE ELVEN RUIN



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"You are sent by the treacherous Dalish to kill Witherfang! I will not stand by and allow that to happen!"

"Is Witherfang your leader?"

"You know nothing, and I am not about to enlighten you. This is our place! Here Witherfang protects us. Here we learn our names! We will defend Witherfang and this place with our lives!"

With shocking speed, the werewolves dropped to all fours, and charged.



CHAPTER 18

WHERE THE DEAD WALK



THE SHEER MOMENTUM OF THE WEREWOLVES' RUSH NEARLY KNOCKED BRONWYN OFF HER FEET. Scout was already in front,

teeth bared in rage, and he slammed one of the werewolves aside, wrestling with it, growling horribly. Tara shrieked spells and Zevran dodged and spun, evading the slashing claws and dripping fangs. Danith rolled out of the way and began loosing arrows with lightning speed. Like a rock, Astrid threw up her shield and stopped a werewolf in full attack. Bronwyn's sword caught one across the muzzle, and laid it open. The creature jerked away, howling. These were terrible creatures, but they were no more terrible than the darkspawn. Bronwyn gritted her teeth and lunged for a shaggy belly, as one of the werewolves reared up on its hind legs.

It as a brief, furious fight: an endless moment of savage action. Two werewolves lay dead, bleeding out into the dust. Abruptly, the fight was broken off, when Bronwyn was struck down by a mass of white fur. Scout snarled

and snapped at the newcomer. Bronwyn scrambled to her sword and was up, panting.

The surviving werewolves had drawn back, and were ranged behind the biggest wolf Bronwyn had ever seen.

Witherfang.

It was no werewolf, nor was it like any wolf of Nature. There was no doubt, looking into those yellow, intelligent eyes, that this was a creature of magic. The white wolf backed away slowly, urging the wounded werewolves along.

Zevran had been raked along his arm, and Tara flicked a healing spell his way. They watched, frozen, as the werewolves retreated. Witherfang bounded ahead, and the tallest of the werewolves rallied the remaining creatures, shouting commands.

"We are invaded! Fall back to the ruins! Protect the Lady!"

"The Lady?" wondered Tara, healing a graze across Scout's back. "What Lady?"

"These creatures must have a ruler we have not yet seen," was Astrid's opinion.

"They are beasts," Danith said dismissively.

"No," Bronwyn said sharply. "They are thinking, speaking beings. Thus, they are not beasts, but *people*." She muttered, "Whatever their appearance, they are *people*..."

Their cries growing fainter, the werewolves vanished into the huge, crumbling ruin. Bronwyn blew out a breath. They would have to go in after them, whether they went to fight or to parley.

"Come on."

"So..." Tara muttered. "this is Werewolf City. Fancier than I expected."

"Not what any of us expected," Zevran agreed. "Is it a palace? A temple? It has no obvious fortifications."

"Thus," Astrid deduced, "it was conceived and built during a time of peace."

Bronwyn nodded. Whatever it was, it was very, very old. Older than Ostagar or the northern ruins. Older than the spire of Fort Drakon. Warily she approached the entrance. The doors were long gone, and vegetation twined greenly around the arched opening. Scout, too, was wary, but seemed to sense no immediate threat.

Ancient trees had become one with the structure. The party descended some crumbling stone steps, and then slid down enormous roots systems to access the entrance hall. Looking around, it was clear that the building was even larger than it appeared from the outside.

"A lot of it must be underground," Bronwyn muttered.

"Underground?" Tara asked. "I didn't know elves lived underground. Danith, have you heard of this?"

"I have," the Dalish elf admitted reluctantly. "I came across a place not unlike this, but smaller, when I was Tainted and my... friend... Tamlen... was lost. The symbols and carvings there also appeared to be of elven design, and much of it was underground."

"We are not the first visitors, either," said Astrid, exam-



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ining a pile of bones. "This must be an unlucky adventurer. Perhaps he was killed by the werewolves, or perhaps by something else."

They found more remains: human, elven — even dwarven, as they moved further into the chamber. Passages led off in several directions.

Scout barked and rushed forward. Two werewolves charged out of the shadows, snarling. Danith, up on the steps and a little behind the others, had a clear shot. She brought one werewolf down almost immediately. The other fell to spells and swords. Bronwyn eased cautiously into the passage from which they had emerged. A long staircase led down, down, down. With grim determination they moved down it. Danith stayed in the rear, watching to see if they were followed. At the base of the staircase they found a heavy metal door.

It was locked and barred from the inside.

"They're here, aren't they, Scout?" Bronwyn whispered.

Scout stared at the door, and growled softly.

"We could wait until they come out," Tara suggested.

"They have to come out sometime, don't they?"

"Alas, *carina*," Zevran whispered back, "this may not be the only entrance."

"You're right," Bronwyn agreed. "Let us explore this ruin. Perhaps there is a back door."

They trudged up the long staircase, back to the entry hall, and moved through the main passage into the ruin.



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Almost immediately, they discovered that the ruin was home to more than werewolves.

Bronwyn had not realized immediately what the long white cords were. She touched one, expecting to feel silken plant fiber, and was disgusted when it clung to her hand, finally snapping away with a dull, low vibration. A strange clicking filled the air. Scout nearly jumped, uttering an undignified squeal. When the bloated bodies scuttled out of the side passage, Bronwyn swore.

"Andraste's bloody knickers! Spiders!" she shouted. "Bloody big spiders! Tara! Freeze them!"

She had seen creatures like these before. These were not exactly like the spiders either in Lothing or in the Deep Roads: they were smaller, a little bigger than a mabari. Aside from that, they seemed equally intent on having Warden for dinner. Glittering black eyes fixed on prey. Tara's spells worked better than Danith's arrows. Bronwyn hacked at furry legs, disabling them, and then plunged her sword into the grotesque bodies. One by one the spiders fell, twitching, and turned belly-up.

"That was nasty," Tara said.

"They are disgusting," Danith agreed, crouching down by one, and digging out the poison gland with her dagger. "Their poison can be useful, however."

"Yes," Bronwyn agreed. "I still have some of the last we brewed from the Deep Roads spiders. It can be very effective."

Danith did a double-take, surprised that her compan-

ions had seen such creatures before. Even Astrid was unsurprised by them. Danith had thought they lived only in the depths of the forest. "In the Deep Roads?"

Astrid confirmed this. "Parts of Ortan Thaig are crawling with them. They're bigger there, too."

They cleared out the chambers along the passage one by one, carefully not to let themselves be trapped. Danith and Scout found few signs of the werewolves here: this was the realm of the spiders. Huge cocoons hung from the ceilings, horribly man-shaped. They were old enough that there was clearly nothing alive left in them. Bronwyn shuddered.

The halls and chambers were littered with broken weapons, disintegrating armor, and rotting sheets of parchment, but here and there they found treasure. Some chests contained old coins – mostly silver – and now and then they came upon a weapon or piece of armor that was still sound. They pocketed the coins, and Zevran found a little pouch of jewels that disappeared under his breastplate. Cautiously, they moved on, checking each passage.

"Feel the air," Danith said at the mouth of one. "This passage leads to a large chamber with either windows or another entrance."

Yes, Bronwyn could feel the dank current swelling up from below. Scout lowered his head, growling.

"The werewolves?" she asked quietly.

"Perhaps."

Scout growled a little louder, and padded carefully down

the stairs. The rest followed him. There was a turn, and they went down another half-dozen steps. Then Bronwyn caught the smell herself. It reminded her of... Flemeth.

"It's a dragon," she said instantly. "It's a dragon."

Tara hissed suddenly, drawing back. "I smell it, too!" she whispered. "It can't be as big as Flemeth, can it? Not and live inside?"

Bronwyn peered into the cavernous chamber before them. Shadows clung to the lofty ceiling, and gathered further in. The room was nearly as large as the Landsmeet Chamber. Stray rays of light from cracks in the roof illuminated the place, but dimly. Bones littered the floor: bones of people and of animals. Bronwyn recognized bear bones, deer bones – that might be halla – and even ox bones.

"The werewolves have gone through here, though not recently," Danith said softly, reading the signs on the floor. "Perhaps they know when the dragon sleeps, or they cling to the walls."

Bronwyn gestured at the animal bones. "Or they leave an offering and run through while the dragon is busy eating."

"Perhaps. That might work."

"Do you suppose it likes spiders?" Tara asked nervously. "I don't think we have enough jerky for a dragon."

Bronwyn picked up the leg bone of an ox and tossed it, end-over-end, into the darkness. It fell to the stone floor with a clatter. An answering rumble made the floor tremble. A large shadow detached itself from the ceiling and flapped down to investigate.

It was certainly a dragon, but it was really not much bigger than a big horse. It nosed at the bone with a blunt snout, snorting. Tara clutched at her staff. Brownyn gestured at Zevran and pointed to the left. He nodded. Astrid she gestured to the right.

The dwarf shook her head. "I have a shield," she whispered on a thread of breath. "You go right." Bronwyn shrugged, and gave Scout a pat. He knew what to do. He would stay with his Bronwyn.

Smoothly and silently, Danith nocked an arrow. Bronwyn mouthed, "The eyes and throat." Danith nodded, drawing her bow.

They burst out on the dragon with silent fury. Three arrows struck before the warriors reached the dragon, one hitting under the left eye. The creature reared back, pained and outraged, spouting flame. Astrid caught that on her shield, crouching behind it, while Zevran rushed in from the left and Bronwyn and Scout from the right. Tara cast a paralysis curse — which slowed it somewhat — and then cast a glyph on the floor to keep it immobilized. It missed. Green light glowed behind the dragon. Tara swore horribly, and tried again.

Wounded and squealing, the dragon lashed out with a claw. Zevran danced over it and rolled away. Astrid shouted, banging her sword on her shield. The ugly head swiveled in her direction, and the dragon inhaled ominously. Another gout of flame burst forth. Bronwyn bounded forward, her

silverite sword gripped in two hands and she aimed at the outstretched neck with all her strength. The blade severed the spine and stuck in the neck half way through. The flame became a trickle, and the beast uttered a horrible, unnatural croaking scream. The neck flopped, and Bronwyn's grip on the sword pulled her down with it. Scout bayed furiously, fearing that she was hurt. Everyone else slammed the dragon with everything they had. The creature screamed again, a wet guttural cry, and thrashed in its death throes. When it lay still, Bronwyn had to set her boot on the neck while she struggled to pull her blade free. At her first fumbling, impotent attempt, Zevran and Tara burst out laughing from relieved tension and excitement.

"Very funny," snarked Bronwyn. She tugged again, and then again, and at last she could wipe her sword and sheathe it.

Many people — many creatures — had died in this chamber over the ages. There were no whole bodies, for the dragon had clawed away the armor to feast on the flesh inside, but in the jumble of bones, one could recognize the symbols of many lands and noble houses, as well as the amulets and signs of gods other than the Maker and his Prophet Andraste. Astrid picked up a signet ring, and shook her head.

"You were a long way from home, House Dace. What brought you here? *Atrast nal tunsha*, my friend."

Zevran moved to the back of the chamber, and they discovered that a portion of the wall had collapsed, making a tunnel into yet another part of the building. In front of

them was a great deal of broken stone, fallen from the ceiling over time. Some of it had made a little wall, and Zevran stopped, staring at what was hidden behind it.

"Come and see!" he called.

"That's... quite the treasure," Bronwyn said, impressed. She had read of dragon hoards, but seeing one for herself was something of an event. Four chests were overflowing with loot. Silver chains, carved malachite, armor, weapons, winking jewels, and everywhere the glint of gold.

"Well," Zevran declared. "I for one hope we survive today, because I would very much like to take this with us."

"We can't carry it all." Bronwyn smiled, hunkering down to fish out an amazing two handled cup of polished malachite. The handles and base were pure gold, beautifully chased. She dusted it off, admiring the pattern in the rich green stone. "A pity, though. This is gorgeous."

"This treasure," huffed Danith, "belongs to the elves."

Astrid, who was admiring a gold torque with wolves at the finials, narrowed her eyes and looked up. "And just how do you make that out?" she asked coolly.

"It used to be the dragon's," Tara argued, holding up a pair of elaborate gold earrings. Inside the big hoops, little jeweled leaves danced and trembled. "Now it's ours by right of conquest. That's the law of battle."

"Some of it is of elven workmanship, my halla," said Zevran suavely. "but much of it is not. And if elves lived here once,

they have long since changed their place of residence."

Bronwyn said pleasantly, "And as I said, we cannot possibly take it all with us. You are perfectly welcome to tell Zathrian about this, Danith. However, we did indeed kill the dragon, so everyone gets to take one thing now, because we may or may not be able to return. One thing, agreed to by all – and a pair of earrings counts as one thing, Tara."

"Oh good!" cried the elf mage. "I want to wear them right now!"

"Does anyone object to Tara's possession of the earrings?" Bronwyn asked her companions. Danith scowled, but shook her head.

"And I want this," Astrid said, displaying the massive gold torque. "This is good workmanship."

"Made by my ancestors," Bronwyn told her. "That's old Alamarri. The wolf was an important totem among them. I have no objection."

"I want that," Danith declared, pointing to the cup in Bronwyn's hands.

"That's mean," objected Tara, "Bronwyn already picked that."

Bronwyn paused, incredibly annoyed, and then smiled graciously. "But I did not publicly call dibs on it. Take it, Danith, if it pleases you. I shall find something else." Politely, she waited for Zevran to make his choice.

He gave Danith a swift, disappointed glance, and made his choice quickly: a wickedly narrow and sharp stiletto, its gold and ivory hilt fashioned in the image of a naked woman. The lovely eyes were tiny sapphires. More sap-

phires studded the little headdress that was the only thing the woman wore. The blade was silverite, and untarnished.

"That's quite a masterpiece," Bronwyn said, impressed. "Tevinter make, and very ancient, I would guess."

"I cannot resist a beautiful woman," declared Zevran, slipping it into his boot.

"Now, you, Bronwyn," Tara said jealously. "And pick out something really nice!"

Fortunately, there were lots of nice things. Bronwyn plunged her hand into one chest and came up with a necklace of big cabochon rubies, smooth and crimson as drops of blood. Each of the rubies was set cunningly in gold.

"Magnificent, my dear Warden!" admired Zevran.

Bronwyn smirked at Danith, and fastened the necklace around her throat, dropping it under her armor.

Not wishing to spend another moment on this trifling matter, Bronwyn led them through the broken wall into a long passage, and found that they had moved from the realm of the living to that of the dead. Dragons and giant spiders were at least material, natural creatures.

But here, the dead walked. Shambling skeletons barred their path, mindlessly advancing until they were cut down. Some of them might be the shades of those adventurers who had died here, but more —

"I think this was a burial place," Tara said. "Look!"

"You're right," Astrid agreed. "It explains a great deal. It is like Bownammar, the dwarven City of the Dead. This great

structure, if not a city of elven dead, is at least their palace."

The chamber they entered contained a large stone block. Not accustomed to the concept of burying whole bodies, it took Bronwyn a moment to process what she was looking at. "It's a coffin," she said, searching for the exact word. "A... sarcophagus."

"There are more," said Zevran, glancing into another chamber.

Tara found it morbid, but interesting. "I read that in Nevarra, they still bury their dead. The rich build huge tombs like houses, with parlors and libraries and ballrooms. It seems so bizarre. I think it's clear that in ancient times the elves buried their dead in these stone sarcophagi."

Astrid thought it very appropriate and rather like home, despite the intrusive tree roots and the random shafts of sunlight, here and there. "The ancient elves respected the power of Stone. Very interesting, indeed. I once read that some elves, when attacked by the ancient Tevinters, took refuge in one of the lost dwarven thaigs, and dwelled there until the advent of the darkspawn."

Danith scowled. The building seemed very alien, but of course their ancestors had not been forced to move from place to place, fleeing human oppression. They had established this great burial temple, and it would have had provided places to stay for visiting families and for the elves who maintained it. That was probably what the first part of the building they had explored was. It was

all a fascinating lesson in elven history. The elves had lost so much; but here, right in the forest, was a piece of their past. The passage opened into a large room with smaller passages leading off from each cardinal point.

"Why are the dead so restless?" Bronwyn wondered. "Could it be because the building is deteriorating?"

"I don't think so," Tara shook her head. "My guess is that... sorry to give you the bad news... I think a demon has taken up residence. The Veil..."

A ghostly elf child rushed past, sobbing.

"Mamae? Mamae?"

"... is torn here," Tara finished her thought.

Scout whimpered. Bronwyn felt like whimpering herself. One heard stories about such phantoms, but it seemed unbelievable. This was no demon, but a wandering spirit. Danith, deeply distressed, tried to talk to the child in stumbling Old Elvish. The spirit did not seem to hear her, and dashed away, vanishing at the doorway to one of the side passages. More walking dead rose in his wake.

"Braska!" snarled Zevran.

They hacked their way through the mindless monsters. They were hard to put down, but not hard to outsmart. It was dangerous and tiresome, and Bronwyn knew that if they had not had to find those bloody werewolves, she would not be here, intruding on an elven burial ground.

The corridors branched.

"Which way?" Tara muttered.

"It doesn't matter," Bronwyn said, "We'll probably have to clear it all out in the end." She led them up a short, broad flight of steps. With some effort on their part, double doors opened on a vast room – larger than the dragon's lair. It was on many levels. On the lowest, dense mist rose from the floor. It was filled with elaborate sarcophagi. Broad pillars supported the rich and inlaid ceiling, like a forest of stone. They all paused, admiring the sight.

"Splendid!" Astrid exclaimed, her opinion of the ancient elves rising with each sign of their artistry and fine craftsmanship.

"It is beautiful," Tara agreed.

"The werewolves do not come here," Danith said positively, examining the dusty floor. Scout seemed to concur.

"Could we look around, Bronwyn?" Tara asked. "Just a little?"

"If you like," Bronwyn agreed. "We need a rest, anyway." She took a long drink from her canteen, and they moved slowly through the burial chamber, stopping to admire this piece of carving or that mosaic. It was a fantastic, dream-like place. There were inscriptions on the sarcophagi, in letters and script unknown to Bronwyn. Danith stood tracing one with a reverent fingertip, her brow furrowed.

"Do you know what it says?" Tara asked softly.

Danith shook her head, defeated. "We have lost... so much. I cannot even read the words of my ancestors..."

Up some mellowed stone stairs they found a round stone platform with an open stone coffin. In it was the

skeleton of a woman. Her gems glittered: the remains of jewel-colored silks clung to her bones.

"She must have been a very important woman among the elves," Bronwyn judged. "A leader? A queen?"

"Why is her coffin open?" Astrid asked.

"*Uthenera*," Danith murmured. "Truly. She lay here in the waking sleep of the elves for countless years... perhaps ages. When her family visited, she would awaken to speak to them, and afterward slip back into the living dream. It is said that there were those who were refreshed by centuries of this, and awakened to once more tread the earth. She chose, it seems, never to rise." She leaned closer. A mist seemed to be gathering in the coffin... Zevran grabbed at her arm and yanked her back.

Well," Tara said, readying her staff, "she's rising now."

The angry, beautiful phantom did not seem to care if some of them were elves. She shouted curses and imprecations in echoing Elvish that Danith could not follow. Scout snapped at the things she summoned. Swords could defeat those faceless masses of flesh, but only Tara's spells could slow or hinder the elven queen's phantom.

"This is more work of the demon!" cried Tara. "We must get out of here!" She cast a web of blue light at the phantom, imprisoning it long enough for the party to take to their heels. The floor trembled. They dashed through the broad double doors and slammed them shut.

"There," Tara assured them. "She cannot leave the burial

chamber, but she ought not to be wandering at all. If we can find the demon and kill it, she and the other spirits of this place will be at peace again."

Bronwyn blew out a breath. Now they had to look for a demon, too? Of course, it was more likely, with their luck, that the demon would find *them*.

In the opposite direction down the long hall were many smaller chambers. Most of these held tombs. Nearly all were refuges of the walking dead. One contained a powerful, malignant manifestation, that Tara identified as a Revenant. Bronwyn's sword arm ached after they finished putting it down.

One small room appeared to be a library. Tattered volumes filled bookshelves, and many tomes lay scattered on the floor. A wooden rack held a curious crystal phial, crowned with a gem. Further back in the room was a stone slab that was too small for a sarcophagus. It had, instead, the look of an altar. Tara was interested in the crystal phial and picked it up, studying it thoughtfully.

"What is it, Tara?" asked Danith.

The mage shook her head, frowning, and touched the gem on the stopper, then walked over to the altar. She laid the phial on it, and abruptly collapsed.

Zevran rushed forward and caught her, lowering her to the ground. Almost instantly, she opened her eyes.

"Oh... hello!" Tara said, smiling up at them, a little dazed. "Did I faint?"

"You certainly did!" Bronwyn replied, kneeling by her in

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concern. "Are you all right?"

"I think so. I'll cast rejuvenation on myself. I hadn't realized I was getting so tired." A blue wash of light spilled over her. "That's better. I'm fine now."

They helped her up and dusted her off, and then went on. Tara smiled quietly to herself.

There was no need to frighten the others. Mundanes grew alarmed when they heard of mages conversing with spirits, always expecting the worst. What Tara had experienced was something astonishing: communication with the spirit of an ancient elf. The being had died long ago and been trapped in the phial for countless centuries. The first clue that something was unusual here was that the gem had been warm to the touch. And then, touching it, Tara's mind swam with visions and memories of a life not her own. She sensed keening loneliness and inarticulate longing. A presence was there: tenuous, desperate, half-mad, tormented by long imprisonment. In exchange for Tara helping him escape his prison to final death, he offered her a wealth of knowledge... very remarkable, specialized knowledge. The elf had been a mage, like Tara, but also a warrior, using his magic to enhance his skill at arms.

"Whoever follows the path of the Arcane Warrior," the spirit whispered, "will be the last of the Order."

"Not the last!" Tara promised. "Not the last! I shall share with my friends! Your knowledge will live again."

When she set the phial on the altar, there had been a burst

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of rapid images: some violent; some meditative. The sword on her back could be a sword indeed. The presence faded: grateful for the release, joyful at the prospect of oblivion...

Tara walked on. She could hardly wait to tell Jowan.

There was a new chamber, full of traps and more walking dead. Tediously, they slew the dead and even more tediously, they disabled the traps. On the floor of the chamber, Bronwyn found a small weathered journal, and thumbed through the pages that were still decipherable.

...And when his kingdom fell, so disappeared the stolen riches of an age. The beast, the Unbound, dormant until one of true spirit claims his throne. So must hunt the hero of his people, the principled who would search for ancient evil. This is how they can make a real difference...

A little further on, the handwriting became less antiquated. *...The riders follow after every town, ever since my lucky break deciphering the story. I see it now, how they take the locals closest to me, preventing rest or kinship. I thought this a road to glory, but I am dogged at every step by his talons. Gaxkang: curse his name and the day I heard it...*

At the bottom of the page, a message was scribbled in a shakier hand.

Three pages, three ages. Same story, updated.

Same as the tavern song, but older!

Signature torn on purpose, but compare and get "Vilhm Madon".

All from him! How?

Inserted among the pages was a single piece of parchment, apparently part of a letter, with the signature torn off.

...You asked, so I'm telling you. Don't go. The stories talk of the riches, but never the names, never where they supposedly spent their wealth. I heard the same tales as a lad in Denerim, felt the same pull, but it's a lie, son. They may paint a trail, but once you're on it, does it lead to the beast or back to you?

There were maps: lots of them, and lots of them of places Bronwyn did not know. It seemed an interesting diversion, so she slipped it under her breastplate, and went on.

The final room they eventually came upon was the largest of all, and lit with magical lamps. An upper gallery was furnished with a long table which supported strange instruments: crystal phials, armillary spheres, oddly-shaped tools of silverite. Down a grand, broad staircase, the wide floor was scored in mystic circles. Brooding statues stood guard. In the center circle was a great globe of glass and gilded bronze.

"It's here," Tara said softly. "Something nasty."

The wraith, or spirit, or demon that opposed them was nasty indeed. It was the source of the walking dead, and raised many against them now: horrid, shambling creatures that were the most life-like they had yet seen. The wraith itself was vaguely man-shaped, but long and attenuated. It floated several feet above the floor and could vanish and appear in any of the circles it chose. A mere

gesture could generate blasts of concussive magic. Finally, the party broke up and stood guard at each circle, ready with magic or a blade, and succeeded in weakening the monster enough that it could no longer escape. Thin, pale ichor dripped from its wounds, and its scream was a high, tearing sound, very painful to hear. When it at last perished, a hush fell over the ruin.

"I think that takes care of it," Tara said, burning the gruesome remains with magical fire. "I wish I had some salt, though: a lot of it. Does anybody have any silver?"

The ashes were scattered, and the circles were defaced with silver, made molten by Tara's magic. "It won't be coming back," she said, brushing her hands off with satisfaction.

"Then let's go," Bronwyn said, relieved. "We can go this way, or we can go that way."

Because there were only the two side corridors. The one they first explored proved to be yet another burial chamber, filled with sarcophagi.

"It's got to be the other, then," laughed Zevran. "Don't they say that you find things in the last place you look?"

They found only more sarcophagi, and another dead end. Bones littered the floor. One of the sarcophagi lids was broken, hinting at rich grave goods within. A square dark pool of water glittered in the middle of the room. A ritual bath? A cistern? Bronwyn scratched her head in irritation.

Tara was baffled. "Where are the werewolves? Did we miss them?"

Danith was also baffled, but annoyed as well. "There's no other place to look. I am certain we did not miss a passage or a hidden door." She made a face. "It stinks of them in here."

Scout agreed. He sniffed at the floor, the reek of werewolves filling his nose. He followed it to where it stopped, and sat down, looking at Bronwyn expectantly.

"There is one more place to look," Bronwyn said grimly, walking to the pool. "Here."

The black water could not have looked more foul and uninviting. Nevertheless, Bronwyn removed her weapons and set about stripping off her armor. Zevran helped her with suspicious eagerness, and she granted him a wry grin. Once down to her smallclothes and her new ruby necklace, she lowered herself gingerly into the water, hating the smell and the chill of it. Very carefully, she began feeling her way around the sides.

It was not a deep pool, but it was deep enough for the water to cover her head when her feet reached the bottom. Blindly, she groped along the walls, moving carefully, lest she suddenly find a pit under her feet. It was unnerving, and she expected at any moment to feel hands—or claws—clutching at her legs.

Out of breath, she broke the surface, gasping. Water trickled from her ears and hair. With a hiss of annoyance, she pushed the wet hair away from her face.

"Did you find anything?" Tara called out. Scout nosed at the water, whimpering.

"Not yet." Down she ducked again, moving past a corner to another wall, her fingernails scraping over chipped tiles. If she could find nothing in the sides, she would have to feel her way over the entire bottom, which did not much appeal to her.

Another corner, another wall. She went up for more air, saw that her people were all right, and dove down again, her hands seeking.

There! The plunge into the void startled her, and she flinched back reflexively. Then she felt again. A large, circular opening. Probing deeper, she felt rounded sides.

"A tunnel!" she gasped out, splashing. "A tunnel that goes toward that wall." She pointed. "I'll follow it as far as I can. I can't believe that those werewolves are any great shakes at swimming underwater."

She took a deep breath and plunged down again, lost to sight. Only the rough ripples in the water hinted that someone was in the dark water.

"I can't swim at all," Tara confessed in a small voice.

"Neither can I," Astrid said grimly. "We'll improvise, somehow."

Bronwyn forced herself to keep her eyes open, as she knifed through the tunnel. She could only go so far, for she must have enough breath to get back. A faint glimmer of light teased her. Her imagination? Taking the risk, though her lungs warned her against it, she swam on.

She scraped her hand on the edge of the tunnel and rose toward dim light, wondering if there would be a werewolf

with a torch above the water. She broke the surface, gasping, and twisted around for a quick look.

To her relief, there was nothing. Another empty chamber. This one, too held sarcophagi, but was better lit, with more torches. It also smelled of more frequent use. Bronwyn made a face, thinking about what the werewolves probably did in this water. Across the room was another door – thank the Maker, a closed door. She clambered out of the pool, dripping and nearly naked, and walked softly to the door, pressing her ear against it.

But the doors in the ruin were heavy, and she could hear nothing. Giving the door the gentlest push, she peered through a crack into the next room. It was spacious and littered with animal skeletons, excrement, and other debris. In the distance, she could hear growling conversation.

Steeling herself to brave the pool again, she slipped down into the water, took another lungful of air, and swam back through the tunnel, more quickly this time. Since she knew what to expect, it was not so difficult. She burst up out of the water to Scout's excited barking and her friends' relieved cries.

"Yes, there's a tunnel," she told them. "It leads to another pool, just on the other side of that wall. The werewolves aren't far away, so we'll need to be quiet. You don't even have to swim. You can crawl along the tunnel if you're fast. You've just got to take a really big breath and not give up until you're out. The problem will be our gear, but I can take it all in a few trips."

"As can I," Zevran assured her. "I can help Tara and

Astrid and with our possessions as well."

"I can help, too," Danith volunteered.

"If it is not far," Astrid said, "I will wear my weapons, at least."

"Fine," Bronwyn agreed. "Let's get everything bundled up and make it as water-resistant as possible."

Danith had a special gut pouch for her bowstrings, which were her main concern. Bronwyn asked that she put the little journal and their tinderboxes in it for safe-keeping. Their clothes and armor would be wet, but there was no help for that. These items were bundled up for easier carrying.

It took some time to get through the underwater tunnel. Bronwyn took one trip, bearing her armor and wearing her weapons, and then went back to help Astrid through. Then she urged Scout after her, hoping he did not panic. He almost did, and shook himself afterwards, coughing and sputtering.

"Only a mabari could do that, Scout," Bronwyn praised him.

With one thing and another, they all made it to the pool on the other side of the wall, and emerged with relief, dripping and wringing out their hair. Putting on their armor was very unpleasant indeed, but must be done, and eventually they were battleready once more. There was nothing left but to follow the werewolf voices to the heart of their lair.

The door creaked as they opened it. There was a barking roar, and three surprised werewolves leaped at them, raging. Bronwyn expected more to come: they were making an unholy racket. The werewolves screamed as blades bit into them, and the Wardens swore and shouted. Metal tore

away flesh and shattered bone. Two of the werewolves went down: one quickly, one thrashing in agony. The last of them broke off the fight and fled down a passage, yelping.

Grimly, Bronwyn wiped her sword and slowly followed.

In a windowless, torchlit room, three werewolves were waiting. Bronwyn braced herself for an attack that did not come. One of the creatures was bleeding from the fight, and slunk back into the shadows, its tail between its legs.

The tallest of them, a pale-furred creature, rumbled, "I am Gatekeeper. We did not think you could come so far. We do not wish anymore of our people to be hurt. I ask you, outsider: Are you willing to parley?"

Big as they were, the werewolves seemed afraid. Why not? They were in mortal danger. Bronwyn wondered what was in the lair beyond the door? Were there children... babies, even? She was here for Witherfang, not to slaughter creatures that were defending their home.

"All right," she said slowly, "let's talk."

Gatekeeper made a brusque gesture. "Not with me! I come on behalf of the Lady of the Forest. She means you no harm. She believes you may not know all you need to know to judge fairly. She is willing to meet with you, provided your offer of parley is an honest one."

"Not an ambush?"

"What would be the point? You have already proven your strength. We have no wish to anger you further."

"Why did you not make this offer earlier?"

"Swiftrunner did not think it would matter. He thought you would attack and kill no matter what was said. The Lady disagrees, and since you have forced yourself this far, we must acquiesce to her wishes."

Finally! A sensible person. She was eager to meet this Lady of the Forest. Bronwyn glanced at Astrid, who nodded. They would give it a try.

"Very well. Take me to this... Lady."

It was not far. Another short passage... another door. It opened on a round chamber whose walls were deeply penetrated by massive roots. Light slanted down a shaft leading up to the surface. It appeared that the last of the werewolves were here: less than a score in number. Some were growling and defiant: some cringing and terrified. There was a sudden stir, and from among them emerged the strangest being Bronwyn had ever seen. Woman-like in shape, fair and slender. but pale green as young shoots and twined with brown roots. She was nearly naked, save for the thin, brown branches twisting up from her thighs and curving tenderly around her breasts. Her long, straight hair was dark, and her eyes brown and opaque as the bark of old oaks. Her hands – the fingers ending in sere and leafless twigs – rested on the shoulders of two of the werewolves. The beasts knelt in submission. The rest followed suit. Scout sniffed and wagged his tail, just a little.

"I bid you welcome, mortal. I am the Lady of the Forest."

Bronwyn almost broke into a smile at the sound of that voice: gentle and lovely, refined and musical. She summoned up all her diplomatic training, and gave a little bow.

"Greetings, Lady. I am glad you have permitted me to speak with you."

The werewolves growled. Swiftrunner shouted, "Do not trust her, my lady! She will betray you! We must attack!"

Tension boiled in the air, and then ebbed at the sound of the Lady's exquisite voice.

"Hush, Swiftrunner. Your impulse to fight will only lead to the deaths of those you wish to protect. Is that what you want?"

"No, my lady," Swiftrunner rumbled hopelessly. "Anything but that."

There was a silence. Then the Lady spoke to Bronwyn again. "I apologize on Swiftrunner's behalf. He struggles... with his nature."

"As do we all, Lady," Bronwyn said quietly.

A soft, ironic laugh. "Truer words were never spoken; but for these creatures it is an extraordinary burden, for their nature is a curse, forced upon them. You must have questions. There are many things that Zathrian has not told you."

"And why should we believe you?" Danith challenged her.

Bronwyn scowled. "I wish to hear your version of the tale," she said to the Lady.

Tara put her hand on Danith's shoulder, much as the Lady had with Swiftrunner. Zevran gave Danith a quick, repressive look, and both sides quieted themselves to hear

what the Lady of the Forest had to say.

She began, "It was Zathrian who created this curse: the curse the werewolves bear; the curse his people now suffer. Hundreds of years ago, when Zathrian was a young man, the Dalish came to this part of the forest. Zathrian had children then: a son and a daughter whom he loved dearly. Nearby lived a human tribe, who wished to drive the Dalish away. One day, when Zathrian was away, they attacked and captured the boy and the girl."

Swiftrunner took up the tale: "The boy they tortured and killed. The girl was raped and left for dead. The Dalish found her, and she discovered she was with child. She... killed herself."

"And so," said the Lady, "Zathrian cursed the humans..."

Danith surged forward. "They deserved it!"

"Sshh!" Tara hushed her. Bronwyn turned and frowned, signaling to them all to be silent. She gave the Lady a slight nod.

After a moment, the Lady continued.

"Zathrian raised a terrible spirit from the forest, binding it in the body of a great wolf, whom you know as Withersfang. This creature hunted the humans. Some he killed, and some survived his attacks, but the curse passed to them. They became werewolves: savage monsters preying on loved ones and strangers alike. The human tribe fled the forest, leaving behind their cursed kin. Many generations have lived and died as werewolves. Other humans, traveling through the forest, have become infected by ill chance. The actual perpetrators of the crime against Zath-



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rian's children, of course, are long since dead and dust. And so the werewolves have lived in this forest for almost two centuries: pitiful mindless beasts."

"Until you came, my lady," rumbled Swiftrunner. "You gave us peace."

The Lady nodded thoughtfully. "I showed Swiftrunner that there was another side to his bestial nature. As you see, they have come to have a society of their own. They have learned speech, and struggle to live as rationally as their werewolf nature allows them. They have taken names. They have regained, if not their memories of their former lives, at least their minds."

Bronwyn was about to ask why, if the werewolves had regained their minds, they did not attempt to rejoin human society, but stopped. It was a ridiculous question. Who would accept such creatures?

Instead, she asked, "Is that why the werewolves attacked Zathrian's clan? For revenge?"

Another, considered nod. "In part. We seek to end the curse. The crimes committed against Zathrian's children were grave, but they were committed centuries ago by those who are long dead. For years now, we have tried to speak to Zathrian when his landships passed this way, and he has ignored us." The gentle, lovely face grew taut and fierce. "We will no longer be denied!"

Swiftrunner put in, "We spread the curse to his people, so he must lift it to save them."



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"Oh," Bronwyn managed, understanding at last. Did Zathrian know this? If so, how could he hesitate a moment to protect those he led?

"I beg you, mortal," urged the forest spirit, "go to Zathrian. Persuade him to come here. When he sees the suffering of the werewolves, surely he will lift the curse, and they will be free."

"And what if he wishes to cure only his own people?"

"Surely his rage cannot run so deep. If he will come, I will summon Witherfang here, for I have that power. If he does not... " said the Lady with silken menace " ...If he does not come... if he does not lift the curse... he will never find Witherfang, and he will never cure his clan."

"I shall find him," Bronwyn said grimly, "and I shall do my utmost to bring him here."

"It is well. The passage to the surface has been opened. Return with Zathrian as soon as you can."

This was the door. then, that the werewolves had barred against them. This was the door that had forced their dangerous detour into the realms of spiders and phantom; that had forced their confrontations with a dragon and a wraith and the walking dead. A small thing, to cause them so much trouble. Bronwyn stalked out, not looking forward to her next confrontation: that with Zathrian. It was a long, weary climb up the broken stairs to the entry hall —

— where Zathrian awaited them.

CHAPTER 19

AN ANCIENT,
GNARLED ROOT

ATHRIAN WAS EXAMINING THE BODIES OF THE RECENTLY DEAD WEREWOLVES WITH AN AIR OF DETACHMENT. He glanced up casually and took in Bronwyn's appearance with no surprise whatsoever.

"Ah! There you are!" he said. "Do you have the heart?" He seemed quite at his ease. Bronwyn scowled at him.

"No," she said, gritting her teeth. "I do not."

Zevran smiled cynically. "He's here to see if we did as he wanted. Impatient, aren't you, old man?"

Zathrian glared at the assassin, and then deliberately ignored him. He turned to Bronwyn. "Did you acquire the heart, or not?"

Bronwyn stared him down. It was easy, towering over him as she did. "I have done my share of fighting today, but as it happens, the werewolves wished to parley. Their leader, the Lady of the Forest, has asked me to bring you to her. She says that you must break the curse before she summons Witherfang. She wants to talk."

The Keeper raised a brow, and scoffed. "The Lady of the Forest! You do understand that she actually is Witherfang, do you not?"

Bronwyn paused. It all fit together. Witherfang, the defender; the Lady, their counselor... "Yes. I thought as much."

Astrid nodded. Bronwyn imagined that she had reached this conclusion even faster than she had herself. Tara and Danith looked surprised. Danith opened her mouth, and then shut it again, in deference to Zathrian, who was speaking.

He said, "Then you must understand that the curse came first from her, and those afflicted it with mirror her dual nature, becoming savage beast as well as human."

"But now, things have changed," Bronwyn said. "For whether by magic or the slow experience of years, the werewolves have regained their minds."

Zathrian found that bitterly amusing.

"Absurd! They attacked my clan, and they are the same savages then that they have ever been. They deserve to be wiped out and not defended. Come. We will go to the creatures, and I will force this 'Lady' back into Witherfang's form. It may then be slain and the heart taken.."

He was not understanding her. He was deliberately not understanding her, and worse, he was patronizing her.

Bronwyn did not move, and tried again, clinging to her temper. "They are speaking beings. They are not mindless beasts. They are *people!*"

"It matters not. They are the same brutes their ancestors

were. They deserve to suffer. We are wasting time."

"These werewolves were not even *alive* when the curse began. Did you even trouble to curse the actual perpetrators, or would any random humans do? *You* cast this curse, not Witherfang. Do you still hate humans so much even after all this time?"

"You were not there! You did not see what they did! You are not Dalish! How could I let their crimes go unanswered? If you had seen your own blood perish before your eyes, would you not swear an eternity of revenge?"

Bronwyn exploded, her frustration boiling into rage, her temper shredded. "No! I would *not!* I would punish the guilty, and not the innocent! So you lost your family? Do you think that makes you *special*? Do not presume that you know anything about me! I have, in fact, *seen* my own blood perish before my eyes. I know who is to blame for that, and I do not randomly slaughter people to slake my grief!" She glared at him, her blood up, ready to strike him down if he said her nay. "We will go now, and *speak* to this Lady."

Danith burst out, "We should do as the Keeper commands! There are only a score of them left, Keeper! When we get inside the lair, it will be the simplest thing to slay them all, if we take them by surprise —"

Bronwyn whirled on her, blazing. "I gave my word! We will not strike the first blow!"

"Then you're a fool, shemlen!" Danith raised her bow, just enough that Zevran reached over and gripped her arm, hard.

Astrid stepped up beside Bronwyn, her posture both easy and menacing. Scout growled, ready to charge and kill.

"Danith," Tara said quietly. "Shut up. Now."

Zathrian looked at them all, taking in the situation, his lip curling up slyly. Bronwyn could have killed him on the spot.

"I fail to see the point of the 'parley.' I did not come so far to listen to a pack of talking dogs." He shrugged, "But very well. I am curious to hear what the spirit has to say."

To do him credit, Zathrian entered the lair of the werewolves with no sign of fear. Bronwyn wondered if his courage was native to him, or it was sprung of his contempt for the werewolves and his confidence in his own magic. At any rate, he stalked up to them, heedless of the growls and snarls of hate, and stopped, examining the the manifestation that called herself the Lady of the Forest.

"Interesting," was his only comment.

The Lady spoke, her face at once sad and hopeful. "We wish to know if you are willing to forgo your retribution, and lift the curse. It would be for the benefit of your people as well as mine."

Zathrian shook his head. "My retribution is eternal, as is my pain. This is justice!"

Exasperated, Bronwyn asked, "How can it be justice to punish the innocent? These people did nothing to you!"

"They have stalked and murdered my clan. Their own deeds condemn them. Let them suffer; let them perish. Yes, that is justice."

The Lady regarded him with cool appraisal. "Are you sure it is only justice? Have you told the mortal *how* the curse was created?"

A pause. Bronwyn then said, "He said he summoned you out of the forest, and bound you to a wolf."

"That is more or less true. This is an old forest, mortal, and I am its spirit, its heart. I was not summoned from across the Fade, but pulled from the rocks, the trees and the very soil. I was then bound into the body of the wolf who became Witherfang: not possessing a host like a sylvan or one of the undead, but bound into a single being. But such a process could not have been accomplished without Zathrian's blood... a great deal of his blood. The curse and his life... are intertwined."

"A blood mage!" Tara cried.

That certainly explained a great deal, Bronwyn thought. Zathrian, for his part, did not deny it, but stood defiant before them.

Cool and sweet-voiced, the Lady continued. "Your people believe you have rediscovered the immortality of their ancestors, Zathrian, but that is not true. Your blood fuels both your life and the power of the curse. So long as the curse exists, so do you."

Zathrian burst out in denial. "No! That is not how it is!"

Bronwyn was furious. "Your revenge is clearly not satisfied by cursing humans for hundreds of years, Zathrian. Now you demand the lives of your own clan? How much revenge does one old man require?"

Ever practical, Zevran asked, "Does that mean if he's killed, the curse ends? Because I could —"

"No," said the Lady quickly. "The curse is bound to his life, but it is more complicated than that."

Zathrian sneered at them all. "Only I know how to end the curse, and that I will never do!"

"You see?" demanded the impatient Swiftrunner. "He will not help! We must kill him! We must kill them all!"

"You see?" Zathrian echoed mockingly. "For all their powers of speech they are only animals: only the same worthless dogs they have ever been... they and their whole evil race! Do what you came to do, Grey Warden! Slay these monsters!"

"Evil race?" Bronwyn shouted back, trying be heard over Scout's furious barking. "Do you mean them, or humans in general? A curious way to deal with an ally! I will not be your pawn. End the curse, Zathrian!"

"No!"

"I'll stand with you, Keeper!" Danith called out, nocking an arrow and aiming at Bronwyn. "Kill the —" She fell to ground, sound asleep. Tara glared at Zathrian.

"We stand with with our Commander," she hissed. "You cannot defeat us!"

Zathrian's staff was lifted in a storm of magic. "Then die with her! Die with them all! All of you will suffer as you deserve!"

Rock cracked as tree roots became animate, seeking out the Keeper's enemies. Screams and roars echoed off the walls. Bronwyn did not wait to see what the old man was summon-

ing: she and Scout bounded at him, furious and irresistible. The door behind him was closed, and he was outnumbered. Briefly stunned, the werewolves slashed at walking trees with naked claws. Tara shouted curses back at the Keeper.

It was all confusion, but twenty-six against one in a closed room was a foregone conclusion. Bronwyn kept her eye on Zathrian, the key to it all. He slipped away, behind one of his summoned trees, and shot a fiery hex at her. It hit Scout instead. The dog yipped in pain, his burnt fur stinking.

That was the end. Bronwyn leaped after the spry old mage, screaming. He fell under a pile of Bronwyn, Astrid, and Zevran, while Tara fought back the straggling, seeking plant tendrils. With Zathrian immobilized, they drooped and went limp.

Bronwyn was in no mood to be charitable, even after Tara healed Scout's burns. She smoothed her hand over the burned patch on his back. "Worthless dogs, indeed!" she muttered under her breath, "My dog is worth more than you and your whole bloody clan together!"

Scout licked her hand, and gazed up at her lovingly. Bronwyn always said the nicest things. And they were true.

In short order, Zathrian was dragged before the Lady, bruised and hopeless. "No," he groaned, "I cannot fight you. Kill me, and end this!"

"You heard him, Lady!" Swiftrunner urged. "Kill him! Kill him now!"

"No. Swiftrunner, if there is not room for mercy in our hearts,

how can we expect room for mercy in his?" She pleaded with the mage, "Lift the curse. Make an end of this violence."

Even with Astrid's sword pressed to his back, Zathrian shook his head. "No. I am too old for mercy. All I see are the faces of my children... my people. I cannot do it."

Bronwyn nearly swore. "Would you really let your clan die for your revenge? Spare them, if you cannot care for anyone else!"

Tara added her own voice. "Lanaya thinks you would do *anything* for them. Prove her right. She trusts you. All your people trust you..."

Zathrian sighed deeply, his eyes dull. "Perhaps... I have lived too long. This hatred in me is like an ancient, gnarled root... it has consumed my soul. What of you?" he asked the Lady. "Your life is bound to the curse as is mine. When I perish, you will cease to exist. Do you not fear death?"

The Lady lifted her hand like one bestowing a blessing. "You are my maker, Zathrian. You gave me form and consciousness where none existed. I have known pain and love, hope and fear: all the joy that is life. Yet of all things, I desire nothing more than an end. I beg you, Maker, put an end to me... we beg you... Show mercy."

Humbled at last, Zathrian whispered, "You shame me, spirit. I am an old man, alive long past his time."

"Then you will do it?" Bronwyn asked wearily, "You will end the curse?"

Zathrian did not look at her, but at the Lady of the Forest, who was gazing on him with boundless compassion. The

werewolves crowded close to her, whimpering and keening in anticipation of their inevitable loss.

"Yes." He nodded. "Yes. I think it is time. Let us put an end to all of this." He raised his staff and brought it down. There was no blast of magic. Instead, he toppled like a dead tree, and lay lifeless on the hard stone, his eyes open and unseeing.

A breeze stirred the air: a quiver of magic, and then a jolt of power. The Lady sighed and lifted her arms. The breeze became a whirlwind. In it, the smell of distant rain and growing things combined with the crackle of lightning. The womanly form dissipated into a swirl of leaves and the memory of sunlight.

"She is... gone..." mourned Swiftrunner. The werewolves raised a howl of grief.

The howls echoed through the chamber, and then grew higher, wilder; they became screams of agony. The curse was lifted, and its victims were regaining their human forms. Some shifted quickly and easily, some struggled and cried, resisting the change. There had been only about a score of them left, but their suffering filled the room. Bronwyn backed away.

"Come," Zevran urged. "We can do nothing to help them through this. Let us give them a moment." He walked over to Danith, asleep on the stones, and dragged her away to a safe corner. Bronwyn scowled. She would have to deal with her, too, but first she wanted to sort out the werewolves.

They were all naked, of course. It was only to be expected.

No infants or toddlers, but two very young and shocked boys and a teenaged girl were the youngest of the pack. There were more men than women amongst them. None were past the prime of life. Bronwyn suspected that one did not live long as a werewolf.

One dazed woman lay shaking on the stone floor, nearly convulsing. One man had slumped to his knees, staring at his hands in wonder. Another was grinning, rubbing his hands over his human form as over something long-lost and now found. He saw Bronwyn looking, and actually blushed, moving his hands to shield his crotch.

A red-haired woman babbled, "What shall I do? What shall I do? What shall I do?" until another woman grabbed her and put her arms around her, murmuring reassurance.

"I remember now," growled the tall man who stood where Swiftrunner had. He clutched at his head, face drawn in anguish. "I remember...my wife...my children...my name... We were traveling through the forest to Gwaren..." He paused. "They... died..."

Bronwyn looked closer. Certain signs of the curse remained. Each of the former werewolves still had curiously yellow eyes. Some were weeping, overcome with recovered memories. Some were bewildered.

"You must have had a name..." Bronwyn said. "A human name. I am Bronwyn Cousland."

"I am Dirk..." he stopped. "It doesn't matter. I am Dirk Wolf, now."

"Wolf!" murmured a woman. "Yes. I can still feel the wolf,

deep inside me. I think I shall always feel it. I will be a Wolf, too."

"What will you do?" Bronwyn asked quietly.

"I... don't know..." the man shook his head. "I could try to go back to Oswin, but it has been a long time." He paused. "What is the year?"

"It is the thirtieth year of the Dragon Age."

"So long!" He shook his head. "No. There is nothing to return to. And some of my brothers and sisters were born werewolves. This is... something none of us really ever expected. I cannot desert them."

Tara pulled Bronwyn aside.

"How will they live?" she wondered anxiously. "They are naked and unarmed in the middle of a wilderness!"

"But they need not be either," Zevran answered, grinning as the thought came to him. "There is loot here: there are weapons, there is armor..."

Astrid steadied herself. It was a wrench, for a dwarf, but – "There is gold," she said. "There is the dragon's hoard. They could take it with them to the nearest human settlement and equip themselves well."

Bronwyn nodded. She looked around at her people. "Do you all agree? Do you agree to let these people have the loot from this place and not keep it for ourselves?"

"Yes." Tara was insistent. "They have nothing. It's been horrible for them."

"Of course," pointed out Zevran, "they may not know how to use weapons – "

"I do," declared another of the men, whom Bronwyn thought must once have been Gatekeeper. "I know how, and I can teach the others." He laid his hand on Dirk's shoulder. "I am... Kellin Wolf, for you are still my brother."

Bronwyn cast a grim look at the unconscious Danith.

"She is *not* going to like this," she muttered.

"She need not know about it," Zevran shrugged. "Zathrian gave his life for his clan and perished. The beautiful Lady of the Forest evaporated, and the werewolves transformed and fled."

Bronwyn considered. "We'll want to take Zathrian back with us, and give the elves the news. Tara, keep Danith asleep a little longer, while we make our plans."

Some of the werewolves – the ones who had previously been human – hurried to their sleeping quarters. Bronwyn followed, to see if they had anything of use.

There were rough cots there, to her astonishment, and even some ragged bedding.

Kellin explained. "I was part of a trade expedition. We were pretty well equipped. The cots were ours."

"I'll want one of them," Bronwyn said. "We can make a travois to carry Zathrian. His clan will want his body."

"I can do that," offered Zevran, and he set to work, hacking off the legs at the foot of the cot, so it could be dragged along behind them.

The wools and linens were snatched up quickly to create makeshift garments. There was some tugging and quar-

reling until Bronwyn raised her voice. The wolves shrank back in a fawning attitude, while Bronwyn tried to share the moth-eaten cloth out with some fairness.

Zevran pulled a little sewing kit from his belt pouch. "I have needle and thread. Scissors, too. Does anyone here know how to sew?"

"I do!" cried a woman. "I remember! It is so strange... a wolf is not naked like humans..."

"I'm cold," declared the teenaged girl. "Why am I so cold?" She stared at Scout, pointing. "Is he still cursed?"

"She doesn't understand," whispered the seamstress to Bronwyn. "She was always a werewolf. This will be very hard. My name is Lita."

"Greycoat," said the girl, shaking her head.

"Lita," the woman introduced herself to Bronwyn. To the girl, she said, "We are humans now. We must have human names. We shall think of a good one for you."

Astrid suggested, "Have them go through the place and bring everything here. Some of the boots I saw might still be usable."

It was a sound idea. Some of the former werewolves were able to pull themselves together and help. Others were still stunned and grieving at the death of members of the pack.

"I'll show you the dragon's treasure," Bronwyn said to Dirk. "There's quite a bit there. I think South Reach is your best bet. It's not more than two or three days on foot from here. You could buy wagons and oxen and go where you like. But you need to go soon, before the elves come back into the forest."

"I understand," said Dirk bitterly. "They will not let go of their grievance. We have shed their blood, and cursed or not, they will blame us. We cannot linger here. You are right."

Tara healed what hurts they had, and was very much an object of wonder to them. They watched Zevran's work with interest, and agreed that they, too, would make a travois to carry the bulkier objects. The best of the treasure was loaded into a single chest. Altogether, they had over fifty sovereigns in coin. There were some decent jewels that Zevran could roughly appraise for them. There were swords and daggers and axes and bows and arrows, some of very good quality. It would give them a very fair start, if they were prudent.

The armor and garb they found was a miscellany, and no one would be fully equipped. Some would have to wrap their feet in leather for the trek out of the Forest. Some would have boots, and some would have gloves. Others would have an old breastplate, or a rusty helmet. They would be a curious sight, out in the light of day.

Bronwyn found a tatty piece of old parchment and drew a crude map for them, showing them the quickest way to get to the Imperial Highway and north to South Reach. They might not be safe from bandits there, but they would be safer from the Dalish. Dirk, Kellin, and Lita were literate, and understood what a map was: most of the others could not read, and could not manage the concept of a little drawing representing a wide stretch of land.

"Once you get there," Bronwyn said, "Take the Imperial



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Highway north. Stay away from the south. I have summoned the Dalish elves to Ostagar where we are fighting the Blight."

"What then?" Kellin whispered anxiously to Dirk, who shook his head.

"We'll find other humans," he murmured, "and see what's out there for us."

Bronwyn had an idea. They had lost so much in the attack on Highever...

"If all else fails," she said, "you can present yourselves to my brother, Teyrn Cousland. He is in Amaranthine, the last I heard, but you could go to his town house in Denerim. I shall add a note."

Bronwyn appended a message to the map.

Permit the bearers of this message quarters at Highever House, and find work for them.

Lady Bronwyn Cousland

In their secret code, she wrote:

Fergus –

These unfortunates were under a curse, and have had a hard time. If you could find something for them, I believe they would serve you loyally.

I can practically see the look on your face, but do it anyway.

Love,

Bronwyn

"The Teyrn of Highever!" exclaimed Dirk, peering at the note. "You are one of those Couslands?" He, Dirk, and Lita exchanged impressed glances.



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"Yes," Bronwyn said briskly. "I am Lady Bronwyn Cousland. Teyrn Fergus Cousland is my brother. It might eventually involve a journey all the way to Highever, but he's a good man and will deal fairly with you. I realize simply being human is a shock to some of you, and that it might take time to deal with that..."

"It *will* take time," Lita agreed. She glanced over to the man who was still examining his now-human body with dazed curiosity. "And some, perhaps, will never adjust. At least we are no longer in pain. For that, we thank you."

Kellin murmured, "And now we have a chance at a future. He said earnestly to Bronwyn, "That makes all the difference."

"Yes," Dirk boomed. "Come, my brothers and sisters! Let us give proper thanks to this lady, Bronwyn of the Grey Wardens! Let us thank her and her companions, who have delivered us from the ancient curse!"

It was eerie. Some of them spoke in words, some yipped, some howled. Some wanted to touch her, too, and sniff at her. Scout cocked his head and wagged his tail anxiously. Gently but firmly, Bronwyn extricated herself. She hoisted Zathrian's slight body over her shoulder. It would be easier to get it up those endless stairs this way, and then load him onto the travois once they were on the forest path. Between them, Astrid and Zevran dragged the comatose Danith.

"Maker turn his gaze on you," she said, by way of farewell. "Stay safe. Wait until we leave in the morning. We shall head west. As soon as we are out of hearing, go north

as quickly as you can."

Zevran built a fire in the entrance hall and Astrid set about preparing food. Tara took a deep breath, and waved her staff over Danith. Bronwyn stood beside her, not looking forward to this. She had been lax as a commander, she decided: running the Wardens like a band of good friends and companions. To some degree, this must change. She could not expect to be "good friends" with every Warden she recruited. However, it was not unreasonable to expect all of them to obey orders and do their duty.

Danith was too dazed to be angry when Tara revived her. She also had little memory of the events just before Tara knocked her out. Bronwyn stood over her, glaring.

"You turned on us, Danith," she said shortly. "Perhaps it was the evil influence of the old blood mage. If Tara had not put you to sleep, I would have killed you as a traitor. You are very lucky to be alive. I shall give you another, last chance. Know this," she added, her face fierce and determined. "If you ever draw bow on me again, you will not live to regret it. Do you understand me?"

A sullen silence.

"Do you understand me?"

"I... understand," Danith spat out. She looked around the chamber. They were all very angry with her: even the dog; even Tara and Zevran, who should have understood.

But they did not understand. For them, loyalty to the

Warden-Commander trumped loyalty to their own blood. They were not of the Dalish. They would never understand. She must accept this, and move on. After a moment, she asked. "But what happened?" She saw Zathrian, lifeless on the travois. "He is dead! Who killed him?"

"No one. He gave his life to end the curse," Bronwyn told her. "It is over. The Lady of the Forest perished as well, since she was his creation. The werewolves regained human form and ran away. Zathrian assured us that the elves would also be cured by his sacrifice."

"But —"

"No 'buts,'" Bronwyn said sharply. "We will sleep here tonight, and return to the camp tomorrow. You will stay here, will not wander off, and will *not* take a turn at watch, since we cannot be sure you will not knife us in our sleep."

Danith looked away from Bronwyn, and to Tara and Zevran for confirmation. Tara gazed back coolly, and Zevran shrugged.

"It is as she says. Also the part about you being lucky to be alive."

"Enough," said Bronwyn. "Now that we have cleared out the werewolves, spiders, walking dead, demons, and the dragon, this place should be reasonably safe. Tomorrow, when we return to the Dalish camp, we shall secure the promise of this clan to fight against the Blight, which they were already obligated to do *by treaty*. You, Danith, will return to us to Ostagar, to fulfill your oath as a Grey Warden."

Danith scowled at Bronwyn, but the Commander had

already turned away.

"Tara, can you put a spell on the body to preserve it?"

"I can do that. And we can wrap him in this piece of linen I found in the lair..."

The trek back to the Dalish camp was long and hard. Bronwyn's shoulders ached with the effort of dragging the corpse-laden travois over the rough path. She was tempted to order Danith to do it, but the elf was more useful as a scout and hunter, and Bronwyn was unquestionably stronger. Mentally she cursed Dalish elves and their absurd burial customs. Had Zathrian been an Andrastean, he would have been immolated, and his ashes retrieved far more conveniently.

They stopped often, refilling their canteens in the bright, cool water of the river, snacking on jerky and dried fruit. Bronwyn lay back under an oak, and watch the play of light and shadow through the leaves of the green canopy overheard. At one stop, Danith darted in and out, and shot a brace of quail, stringing them together to hang over her shoulder, a feathered trophy. At another, she pointed out a strange tree to Zevran and Tara, and told them that it was ironbark. Bronwyn studied it. The bark was unusually dark and smooth, and the branches made a graceful urn-like shape. The leaves were large, and fell in dagged fronds. Bronwyn salvaged a leaf, and was fairly sure she would recognize the tree if she saw it again. Then they moved on.

Astrid and Zevran each took a turn pulling the travois,

grimacing at Bronwyn in sympathy. Their prospective allies must be kept sweet, and thus this nonsense about bringing back the crazy old dead man.

Danith walked ahead and alone, her anger and outrage gradually fading. In their place blossomed uncertainty and remorse. Zathrian had cast the curse in the first place. He was a blood mage, which was something the Dalish had been taught to fear. She had heard that the mild-mannered Jowan had dabbled in blood magic, but she had dismissed that as nonsense. Jowan could not possibly be a blood mage. Blood mages were monsters: creatures who put themselves beyond the pale of all speaking peoples.

But Zathrian *had* been a blood mage. He had not denied it. He had felt that anything was justified in his pursuit of vengeance. Danith was no stranger to the concept of vengeance herself, but to pursue it to the point that it harmed his own people...

That was the sticking point. Danith could not bring herself to care what Zathrian had done to a pack of savage humans; but the moment the first elf had been attacked, Zathrian's duty was to lift the curse and protect his people. His children had been dead for hundreds of years. Even if the humans had not killed them, they would have been dead of old age anyway. Zathrian, in the end, had failed to be a good Keeper. He had failed his people. If Bronwyn and the others had not forced the issue, how many more Dalish would have died? Forcing him to end the curse had been the right course of action, but Danith had been blind

to it: blinded by her instinctive loyalty to a Dalish Keeper. She had made a fool of herself, and had nearly been a dead fool in the bargain. It was a bitter thing to acknowledge. Keeper Marethari would be so disappointed in her if she knew what she had done...

At length, the landmarks grew more familiar, and the camp lookouts spotted them.

Word of their success had already reached the Dalish. The afternoon before, a hunter had returned to camp, his werewolf-inflicted injuries already healing. As twilight fell, the wife of another hunter had made her appearance, naked and stumbling. She told a wild and terrifying tale of having been transformed into a werewolf. The other werewolves had not been unkind to her, and had urged her to accept her new nature and resign herself to life among them. She had refused, hoping to die, and had wandered away from the pack. Quite suddenly, she had been seized with agonizing pains, and had regained her true form. Her husband welcomed her home with joy and relief. When they looked for Zathrian, in order to share the glad tidings, he was nowhere to be found.

Lanaya ordered everyone to stay in camp, and wait.

"It would seem that the Grey Warden has succeeded in her task," she said. "Perhaps she and our Keeper together!"

Thus, Bronwyn and her party were greeted with jubilation. That quickly soured to anger and mourning, when the linen-wrapped figure on the travois was revealed to be Zathrian.

The clan immediately turned accusing glares at Bronwyn and, to a lesser extent, at Astrid. Tara held up her hand, and stopped them with her words.

"Zathrian gave his life to end the curse. It was the only way."

After that, Bronwyn kept the story brief.

"It was his conclusion," Bronwyn told them, "that the curse could only be completely lifted with both his own death and that of the creature Witherfang. We cornered Witherfang, and then Zathrian arrived and performed the rite. The rest you know."

"And what of the werewolves?" a tall elf demanded.

"We slew many," Bronwyn said, mourning silently for the poor, hapless creatures. "A handful survived and fled east. Some of our party were wounded, and we were in no position to pursue them."

"I can pursue them," an elf woman said murderously. "Those foul beasts killed my husband!"

Bronwyn grimaced. She did not bother to tell these elves of the ancient temple or the dragon they had found there, nor of their battles with the walking dead or the phantoms. If Danith wished to gossip, that was her affair. At the moment, the clan was much more focused on the death of their Keeper.

"He died a hero," sighed one woman.

Lanaya grieved more than anyone at the loss of Zathrian, but was consoled by the outcome.

"It is done, truly: lifting the curse has restored our hunters." She said, "I felt it... when he departed. I think he was ready to go."



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"I'm sure he was," Bronwyn agreed blandly.

Maybe at the end... Bronwyn thought... maybe at the very end he *had* been. He had been a cruel, vicious, wicked old blood mage, who had cursed all humans within his reach without regard for guilt or innocence, but these people had loved him, and it would be stupid to rant on about her contempt for such a person. She swallowed her disgust, and concentrated on respecting Lanaya's grief, while not agreeing with opinion of Zatharian at all.

Lanaya had more to say. "It will be hard to replace Zatharian. He was our Keeper for many centuries. But I am Keeper now, and I hereby swear that I will uphold our ancient treaty with the Grey Wardens. Give me two handfuls of days, and I shall gather the clan and send word to our kin. It has been a long time since the Dalish marched to war, but I trust that in the end we shall make a difference for you. We are coming, with great speed and purpose, and we shall strike at your foes. This, I swear."

There were murmurs of support, some willing, some grudging from the elves crowding around. Sarel shook his head.

"And so Zatharian is lost to us, after all these centuries! We must lay him to rest as is proper." More murmurs of assent. The black-haired hahren looked up sharply at Bronwyn. "And now Keeper Lanaya prepares to take us to war, to fight alongside the humans! I never thought to see such a day."

Bronwyn smiled pleasantly. "It is not the first time that humans and elves have fought as allies. The last Archdemon



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was slain by an elf: the great hero Garahel, a Grey Warden. We do honor to our ancestors to follow in their footsteps."

One young hunter spoke up. "I, for one, look forward to fighting these darkspawn creatures!"

Tara gave him a quick, encouraging smile. Sarel was not impressed.

"Do you? I hope you return to tell us all about it!" He looked at Bronwyn again, "As for you, Grey Warden, I expect I shall someday tell tales of you. You will excuse us as we honor our fallen Keeper. You," he said with a nod to Danith, Tara, and Zevran, "are welcome to witness this."

Zevran and Tara exchanged looks, and knew it was politic to go. Danith had not imagined doing anything else, of course. Gratefully, Bronwyn and Astrid returned to their own little camp nearby. Scout turned his back on the unfriends, and trotted after Bronwyn, not neglecting to lift a leg as he passed an aravel. While Astrid gathered wood and Bronwyn tended the horses, the dog sighed deeply, flopped down, and rolled comfortably in the dirt.

"Leaving at first light, aren't we?" Astrid asked briskly. There was stone at Ostagar: good, dwarven-laid stone. She would cherish it.

"As soon as the first ray is over the horizon," Bronwyn assured her. "I'll speak to the Keeper later today, after the burial, and we shall talk about the practical aspects, but yes, I cannot be gone too quickly from this place. I hope those poor people get to South Reach before the elves catch them."

"Perhaps Lanaya will keep them too busy preparing for their march south for them to indulge in private revenge."

"Perhaps. I shall speak to her about that, too. We have more than kept our part of the bargain. The Dalish can bloody well keep theirs."

When Tara and Zevran returned from the funeral, Bronwyn snatched up her towel, clean smallclothes and her dwindling sliver of lavender soap.

"I'm off to have a bath downstream."

"What a wonderful idea!" Tara exclaimed. "My hair smells like werewolf pee."

"A *cold* bath," Astrid muttered, longing for Orzammar and hot running water.

"I shall stand guard!" Zevran swept a gallant bow. "I shall watch over you all most zealously."

"Look all you like, Zevran," Bronwyn said wearily. "I really don't care."

Scout, to his chagrin, was forced to endure a scrubbing as well. He was philosophical about it, knowing he could always roll in the dust later. Playing in the water was good fun.

As soon as they finished their baths, the women stood guard over Zevran. Or at least Bronwyn and Astrid did, since Tara's version of standing guard seemed to consist only of peeking and giggling. Bronwyn's hair was the longest, and she struggled to untangle the snarls.

"I give up," she finally said. "I've got to talk to Lanaya anyway."

She gave them a nod and set off to find the Keeper, her

wet hair soaking the back of her shirt. She passed Danith, who was chatting with the clan craftmaster. The ironbark they had found was apparently the topic of conversation. The man was promising to find the tree and send a ironbark bow to Ostagar for Warden Danith. How nice. Bronwyn passed without a word, and saw Lanaya near her aravel.

The conversation was brief and friendly. The Dalish had no need of maps, Bronwyn was told, for the location of ancient Ostagar was well known. It was large, unmistakable, and at the southern terminus of the Imperial Highway, after all. Lanaya said she hoped to be there soon, and added some words of gratitude.

"For a stranger — a human — to step in and save us from this dreadful curse! The Grey Wardens deserve their reputation. It is comforting, too, to know that the Dalish are represented among them."

"Thank you," said Bronwyn, thinking that Danith was an atrocious Warden and that she wished she had never been forced to recruit her. It was possible that a different Dalish elf might do better. It was important not to include a whole race in her dislike of one individual. That was where Zathrian had gone wrong, after all.

She added, "It is indeed important that you come as soon as possible. On that head, I must ask that you encourage your people to direct their energies toward preparing to march to Ostagar, and not delay your departure by tracking the last of the wretched werewolves. I'm sure that

many feel wronged, but the werewolves were themselves victims of the curse and can do no more harm. It is much more important to defeat the real danger."

"Of course," Lanaya agreed. "I shall give orders to that effect. However, you understand that many lost loved ones. When feelings run so high..." She saw Bronwyn's face harden, and said, "I shall do my best. I promise you."

Well, there was no more to be said, but Lanaya surprised Bronwyn by presenting her with a pretty leather-bound volume.

"*Uthenera*, the book is called. It contains the songs of the elves," Lanaya explained. "It was among Zathrian's possessions for many years. It is an oddity, as elves do not generally write their music, but pass it from ear to ear. Do you know the symbols?"

Bronwyn opened the book, and was pleased to see the notes she had learned in childhood. She was no great musician, but she could read this and learn the tunes and words, at least. And Leliana would find it fascinating...

"Yes," she said, smiling. "I know how to read music. This is a delightful gift, Keeper, and I shall treasure it."

Danith arrived in time to have a quick bath herself. She waited until Astrid went back to their camp to build up the fire, and then took a deep breath.

"*My actions bring me sorrow*," she said clearly. She had been wrong, and must confess it.

Tara did not recognize the Dalish saying, but Zevran did. It was a traditional ritual apology.

"*And so they should*," he answered, rather blithely. "I would have regretted having to kill you, my halla."

Tara scowled, "That was an apology? You're just apologizing to Zevran and me? Because we're *elves*?" She shook her head. "I don't think I'll ever understand the Dalish."

Danith bit back the hot reply. Zevran smiled at her. "It was a practice apology! She will first apologize to us, and then, as she grows more expert, she will also apologize to our doughty dwarven princess and finally to our fearless leader."

Speaking to Bronwyn was something that Danith would prefer never to do ever again, but she managed to say, "I shall apologize to Astrid as soon as we join her at the campfire."

"That's good," Tara said seriously. "You really scared me, Danith. I couldn't believe you'd betray us! I forgive you, I suppose, but you have to understand that it's going to take some time for the shock you gave me to wear off."

The performance was repeated on their return. The dwarf gave Danith an impassive, searching look. Feeling more explanation was needed, Danith added, "Obeying a Keeper is second nature among the Dalish. It is what one does. It did not occur to me to go against him. However, I can now see that his actions were wrong, as were mine in supporting him."

Astrid considered this. "You are indeed lucky to be alive. I do understand the call of blood, but quite frankly, if the

King of Orzammar commanded me to do one thing, I'm fairly sure I'd do the opposite to spite him. Of course, he's my brother, and I already know he's a swine. Besides, I am a Warden, and am not bound to obey anyone other than the Warden-Commander. Nor are you bound to the commands of the Dalish any longer. You are a Warden among Wardens. If it helps, perhaps you should henceforth regard this as your clan, and Bronwyn as your Keeper."

"She is not a mage." Danith frowned, taking the dwarf's words literally.

Astrid laughed. "Leadership is a magic of its own."

Bronwyn returned soon, carrying a thin book, her dog at her heels. Feeling the others' eyes on her, Danith stepped forward. Her carefully composed words seemed suddenly inadequate. Still, she must do this...

"Commander?"

A pause. Bronwyn looked at Danith, and cocked her head. The dog cocked his head at exactly the same angle. It would have been funny, had it not been so unnerving.

"Yes?" Bronwyn asked.

"I... apologize for my conduct. I was wrong to threaten you and my comrades. Zathrian erred in putting his vengeance before his clan. I erred in putting my loyalty to a Dalish Keeper ahead of my duty as a Warden. It will not happen again."

"Good." Not smiling, Bronwyn gave her a nod. "See that it doesn't. You have been difficult and insubordinate. We need to work *together*, not against one another. I am open to ideas

and suggestions, but I will *not* have my authority questioned."

"I understand."

"I'm glad."

The uncomfortable moment ended with a stirring of the bushes at the edge of camp: a polite Dalish warning that someone was coming. The Wardens turned, and found a small group of young Dalish men and women approaching. The young hunter who was not afraid to face the darkspawn addressed Bronwyn.

"We wish to hear about the deeds of Warden Garahel."

A red-haired girl said, "The elves cannot have too many heroes."

Bronwyn smiled. "Nor can the people of Thedas. I am surprised you do not know of Garahel. I have a book about him back at Ostagar: I'm sorry now that I did not bring it with me. I remember quite a bit, however." She hoped she did, or at least enough to give them the short version. How could they not have heard of Garahel? Of course, Zathrian had been their loremaster...

"Come and sit with us!" Tara said eagerly, pleased to have visitors.

Danith was pleased, too: very pleased to put an end to that awkward apology. She suspected her foolish betrayal would not soon be forgotten. However, if Bronwyn was willing to be distracted at the moment, Danith could only be grateful.

The young elves sat cross-legged on the ground around the fire, and Bronwyn began her tale...

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BRONWYN'S TALE OF THE GREY WARDEN GARAHEL

Three cities, all in the Free Marches, claim the honor of being the birthplace of the Hero Garahel: Hasmal, Markham, and the great city of Starkhaven itself. Whichever city it was, Garahel was born and raised in an Alienage, the son of free but impoverished elves. This was in the Black Age, a time of war, for the Chantry had proclaimed an Exalted March against the Tevinter Empire.

From what he confided in his friends among the Wardens, Garahel was a wild youth who ran away from home and made his way as a mercenary in this army or that; for the endless conflict was a golden opportunity for a gifted swordsman. As to why and how he became a Grey Warden, there is some dispute. Some say that he fell foul of vengeful nobles, but others say that one day the Grey Wardens flew overhead on their griffons, and the young Garahel's heart was captured by the magnificent creatures. He journeyed far and long, for nothing would do but that he should make a pilgrimage to Weisshaupt: to the very seat of the Wardens, and lay his sword at their feet.

He was welcomed kindly. Not only was Garahel among the greatest swordsmen of his day, but he had a most winning and amiable manner, and it is said that his face was "fair as a day in summer." All his life, he was pursued by both men and women, and there are many tales of his romantic adventures. At any rate, he joined the Wardens and served them with such ability and devotion that he rose quickly through their ranks. At one time he

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was Warden-Commander of the post at Ansburg, at another, of Tantarvale. Wherever the need was greatest, there Garahel went. His steed was the griffon Meranth, greatest and cleverest of his kind.

The Exalted March against the Tevinters came to an abrupt and frightened end when the Archdemon Andoral arose in Exalted 5:12. Exhausted by years of war, Thedas was unprepared for their onslaught.

Like an evil tide, darkspawn swept across the north and northwest. The country of Antiva was overrun and its entire ruling family slaughtered. Unhindered, the darkspawn then poured into the Free Marches and Rivain. Darkspawn attacked the Anderfels as well, and the capital city of Hossberg was besieged. It was Garahel who gathered an army of Andermen and Wardens and broke the siege, saving the city. After great struggle and tremendous effort, it was Garahel who united the Wardens from all lands, and led the march east to Starkhaven. We can only imagine the difficulties he faced, or the indomitable charm and leadership he displayed, for there he succeeded in forging an alliance among the minor kings and lords of the Free Marches, something no one else has succeeded in doing before or since. This great army he led north, with the Grey Wardens flying before the host, riding their griffons.

It was at the city of Ayesleigh, on the shores of Rialto Bay, where Garahel's host met the darkspawn horde. For days and nights, heroes battled monsters. Garahel, on his beloved griffon Meranth, fought the Archdemon in the black and Blighted skies. Lightning crashed around them: the screams of the dying rose to the heavens.



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Garahel struck the blow that slew Andoral, but was himself slain; for Meranth was wounded mortally and crashed to earth with his rider. With Garahel's sacrifice, the tide of battle turned, and the darkspawn were trapped between the united army and the sea. It is written that so many darkspawn were slaughtered on that field that many thought they they were vanquished forever. They must have been sorely weakened, truly; for it has been four hundred years since Garahel's victory, and only now have the darkspawn recovered enough strength to challenge Thedas.

A song is still sung about that battle: The Ballad of Ayesleigh.

*The wind that stirs
Their shallow graves
Carries their song
Across the sands.*

*Heed our words
Hear our cry
The Grey are sworn
In peace we lie.*

*Heed our words
Hear our cry
Our names recalled
We cannot die.*

*When darkness comes
And swallows light
Heed our words
And we shall rise.*



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The young elves seemed to like the story very much, and made Bronwyn repeat the song several times, fixing it their memory.

"What a pity the griffons died out," Tara sighed. "Everyone would want to be a Grey Warden if we still had griffons."

There was a general, wistful consensus around the fire that that was true. Understanding that the Wardens would be leaving very early in the morning, the visitors departed, with warm thanks and some kind gifts: jars of *hallenansal* sealed with wax, and bags of dried berries.

Bronwyn went to check on the horses, and found Danith standing behind her. It was tempting to snap at her and tell her not to *do that*, but she simply said, "Yes? You wanted something?"

"Commander... when we return to Ostagar, may I borrow the book... the one about Garahel?"

"If you promise to return it," Bronwyn said lightly. She *hated* people who kept borrowed books.

Her bedroll beckoned invitingly. She was exhausted, and no Grey Warden stamina could conceal it from her. She might even need a rejuvenation spell on the morrow. Scout lay down beside her, cleared tired himself.

Mentally, she was already far away from the Dalish, her thoughts racing south to Ostagar and what the situation there might be. She would have sensed it if the darkspawn had made any major moves, but all sorts of other

things could have happened. What were her Wardens up to? Were they safe? Were they well? Had Vaughan made any attempt to harm Adaia? Was Alistair overwhelmed? And there was Loghain...

Loghain would be furious and grieved by his daughter's letter. Bronwyn longed to see him: longed to be in the presence of one capable of shouldering his own burdens. Loghain was before her in imagination: tall, fierce, imposing, his glittering eyes softening a little for her, his big hands gentle...

The pang of desire was sullied by dread. The Orlesians had attempted his daughter's life, and had succeeded in compromising it. They had attacked with secret malice, their agent penetrating into the Queen's private chambers. Such deeds called for vengeance, and Ferelden was manifestly unable to compass it. It was bitter to contemplate, but their country was in no position to threaten the Empire in any serious way. It never had been, and certainly now was not, with the dark-sawn boiling up from the south like pus from an ulcerated wound. There was nothing they could do but act in secret themselves, and foil Empress Celene's schemes.

What kind of people took advantage of a Blight to further their own interests? Bronwyn felt a surge of loathing for the Orlesians. They spun their webs like fat, bloated spiders, smug in their superior power, convinced of their superiority... their right to rule the Ferelden barbarians. It was galling not to be able to slap the smirks from their faces.

Maker forbid that Anora should die! Cailan would be

perfectly within his rights to remarry. What would they do, if Anora was gone, and he proclaimed the Empress of Orlais his choice? If they deposed the King, the country would fall apart. They already had one rebel to deal with. They could not cope with more.

What was happening to Fergus, anyway? How was he faring in his campaign against Howe? Bronwyn longed to be done with all this dashing about the countryside. Once in Ostagar, she would be in a position to know what was really going on...

Bronwyn wondered if Loghain would shout at her, when she mentioned Brother Genetivi and the Urn of the Sacred Ashes. Probably. He was very good at shouting. All things considered, she would rather be with him, even when he was shouting, than apart. They were stronger together. Together, she felt they could somehow win through this time of troubles.

Her eyes closed, and she lay half-asleep, while the borders of the Fade crept closer. She seemed to stand on a mountaintop, a chill wind cutting through her, the kingdoms of Thedas spread before her feet. The harsh scent of dragon and a distant bellow reminded her that her worst enemies were not human. Morrigan was standing by a roaring fire, smirking at her, and was suddenly a hawk, flying away. Bronwyn blinked, and saw Loghain standing by a window sheeted with rain. He looked so sad that she wanted to speak to him, but no sound emerged from her mouth. On her other side, Fergus was climbing an endless rope, his face grim with inexpressible determination...

She sank deeper into dreams, and her blanket on the forest floor became a splendid, narrow bed, where she lay still and unmoving, surrounded by a sea of torches. Stars glittered silver in the dark-blue dome of Heaven, and around her rose the music of a thousand voices, blending into a single compelling chorus of triumph and grief.



DANITH MAHARIEL, GREY WARDEN

CHAPTER 20



A THOUSAND DANGERS

THE BLOW WAS STRUCK AS LOGHAIN WAS TOTALLY FOCUSED ON THE DARKSPAWN IN THE VALLEY BEFORE THEM. Between the Dalish, the Wardens, and the Glavonak brothers, it was a maze of traps. All sorts of traps were there: trip lines for explosive traps, and pit traps lined with poisoned spikes. It was joy to see the creatures trying to rush them, and then going down, down, in a haze of smoke and flame, in screams and gurgles.

It was the Wardens the darkspawn wanted: the little band of Wardens led by Alistair. Wardens could sense the darkspawn and the darkspawn could sense *them*. Reasonably safe behind a palisade, the Wardens shouted taunts and insults. The darkspawn were drawn in, unable to resist: too witless not to follow their kindred to destruction. The Dalish archers loosed volley after volley, until the only darkspawn left alive were twitching on the sodden, bloody ground.

At first he thought someone had impudently slapped him on the back. There was no pain, but a curious numb-

ness. Alistair was turning, eyes widening, mouth opening to shout. For some reason, he was running at Loghain, sword upraised. Loghain tried to rebuke him for leaving the line, but his mouth would not obey his orders. The ground was coming up to meet him, which was very, very odd, and he was going to have to do something about that...

He awakened to find himself stretched out on his belly on the long council table. He was being discussed in low voices, which irritated him. Someone was working on him with gentle hands, soothing away the dull throb of the deep stab. Someone had removed his armor and his shirt. The breeze on his bare skin was unpleasantly chilly. Alistair was standing there, among the officers, his young Maric-face alarmed. Cauthrien was there too, her usually stoic expression strained.

"Lie still," a woman's voice instructed him. It must be that Healer: the mage Wynne.

"No joke," came the voice of the Warden mage Anders—the one who also looked like Maric. "At least the fellow who stabbed you wasn't joking."

From the corner of his eye, he could see Wynne's hands gathering blue light and spilling it over the wound. The torn flesh ceased to weep blood, and he could actually feel it knitting together.

"We won't seal it up yet," Wynne explained, her voice warm and soothing. "First, we'll draw out any poison that

might have been on their weapons."

"Right," said Anders grimly. "Let's get to it."

This was even less pleasant, but Loghain was in front of his officers, and it behooved him to bear it without flinching.

"You know," said Anders, "at this point, it's customary for the patient to whine, fidget, moan, or make bad jokes."

"Anders, you forget yourself," Wynne rebuked him in a whisper.

"Did I? Oops. Anyway, it's just as well you were out of it when we drew the blade out your shoulder. Tricky business, that, when it was wedged so tightly in a chink of your armor."

"Anders!"

Loghain coughed and cleared his throat. "Let him talk. I want to know what happened."

"Very well," Wynne sighed, "but let me finish this first." She summoned her power again, Spell wisps seethed around the open wound and hissed over the blood trickling around the curve of hard muscles. The mist darkened and thickened, rising up in a sucking little whirlwind. Anders was doing something with a vessel in his hands: possibly gathering the poison.

"My, that's nasty," Wynne murmured. "I have no idea what that is, but between us, Anders and I should succeed in analyzing it. We'll make sure all of it is gone. Feeling better, now, are we?"

"Yes," Loghain said, with heavy sarcasm, sounding out the words carefully. "We are."

"Me, too," Alistair agreed fervently, from his perch on a nearby bench. "Those guys were *fast*. I almost didn't see them at all. And then you didn't say anything when you went down. I thought you were dead!"

"Not yet." Loghain added, "Have they said who sent them?"

A silence. "Well," Alistair said sheepishly. "Funny thing about that, but they put up quite a fight, and well..."

"They're dead," Cauthrien said flatly, with the faintest hint of satisfaction leaking into her tone. "Their heads are already decorating spikes on Ostagar Bridge."

Annoyed, Loghain growled, "You know, it would have been better if you'd taken them alive instead of killing them."

"Sorry," Alistair replied, not sounding sorry at all. Someone had brought him a hunk of bread and cheese, and he stuffed his face while Wynne and Anders worked their magic. "When somebody tries to kill me I just sort of naturally want to kill him back."

Loghain grunted at that.

Wynne muttered, "You're very lucky to be alive!"

A stir among the officers, and they moved hastily apart, leaving a space for the newest arrival.

"Loghain!"

Cailan burst out of the crowd of onlookers, surrounded by some half-dozen of his closest friends. He stopped and stared, unbelieving, at the sight of his invincible father-in-law prone on a bloody table, stripped to the waist and wounded.

"You're hurt!"

"I'm fine."

"No, he isn't — " Wynne, Anders, and Alistair contradicted him simultaneously. Alistair blushed, and deferred to the healers.

Wynne said, "As far as I can see, he's alive only because he's a very stubborn man. That knife was poisoned!"

Cailan gaped. "An assassination!"

" — *attempt*," Loghain said dryly. "As you see, the attempt was a failure."

"Your Majesty," said Cauthrien. "The assassins were killed in the attempt, but I am looking into the matter myself. They came here with Bann Loren's men, and we will be questioning everyone in that unit to see what they knew."

"Of course," Cailan agreed, still staring. "Anything..."

"Meanwhile, it would probably be a good idea," Anders pointed out, "for somebody to bring a stretcher and take the Teyrn up to his quarters, which would be a lot more comfortable than lying on a table in front of the army."

"*Anders!*" hissed Wynne, poking him.

The men on watch on the outer works did not even demand a password from Bronwyn and her companions. They arrived in the latter half of the afternoon, and Bronwyn found that her mind was already on food, drink, and a good wash. Scout panted at her stirrup, eyes turned longingly to the camp while the guards exchanged greetings with the Wardens.

"Well met, Girl Warden!" the shortest of them hailed her. The others stared at the party on horseback, openly curious.

"Well met indeed!" Bronwyn answered easily. "It's good to be back at Ostagar! How fares the King? And how is Teyrn —"

"Wounded!" shouted the men in excited chorus. It took a little time for them to calm themselves and clarify the situation. Their spokesmen told the story with terrified relish.

"Teyrn Loghain was wounded in the battle west of here, but the Healers say he'll be fine. Word is that the Wardens saved his life!"

"But it's not serious, you say?"

"He'll be fine," the short fellow repeated, as if repeating it would make it true and keep everyone safe. "We couldn't spare Teyrn Loghain!" The men around him nodded solemnly.

"Certainly not," Bronwyn agreed, rather alarmed. "Good day to you." She kicked her horse into motion and they clattered through the gate and up to the Tower of Ishal. Familiar people were already waving at her.

"Hey, Boss!"

Bronwyn grinned at the welcome sight of Brosca. Dismounting, she led the way up to the steps to the tower door and her friends. Brosca had turned away and was shouting something. Before Bronwyn reached the door, friends were piling out of it. Men were coming to take the horses. Bronwyn slid down from the saddle gratefully. A pleasant buzzing filled her senses, the awareness of more Wardens: her brothers and sisters. Her other friends, too: Oghren

waved a sloshing cup at her, and Sten loomed behind, his face inscrutable.

Leliana hugged her, warm and comforting.

"Oh, I have missed you! There is so much to tell! Did you meet the other Dalish?"

Brosca grabbed her too. "Where's Jowan? Is he dead?"

"No!" Tara shouted past Bronwyn. "He's fine, back in Denerim, and all dressed up like a nobleman!"

Cullen was there too, shyly patting her shoulder. "Bronwyn."

Bronwyn gave him a quick, warm smile. "Is everyone all right?"

"Yes. Leliana and Oghren are just back from a patrol. Carver's gone to get Adaia. Alistair got some scratches when he saved Teyrn Loghain, but they're already healed."

"I want to hear everything!" Bronwyn said. "And I've got a lot to tell. Get everyone together and let's go upstairs!"

Brosca tugged on Bronwyn's arm, grinning, "Just wait 'til we tell you what happened to Bann Vaughan!"

"What happened to Bann Vaughan?" Bronwyn asked, concerned.

"Later," Cullen urged quietly. "It's not for everyone's ears."

More friends lined the stairs and fell into step on the way back to the Wardens' quarters. More and more people recognized Bronwyn and spread the word that the "Girl Warden was back!" The noise spread enough that Alistair heard it and came out of Loghain's quarters, shutting the door quietly. He glanced back frowning, but his handsome

face lit up in a smile as soon as his eyes met Bronwyn's. In an instant, she was enveloped in a hug.

"Ow!" Alistair laughed. "You've got some pretty sharp edges there. The Teyrn was wounded –"

"Yes, I heard," Bronwyn said quickly. "How is he?"

"Sleeping, the last time I looked. Wynne says he'll be well enough to come to dinner." He dropped his voice. "And he will be, now that the King isn't there talking at the top of his voice." He breathed the next words in her ears. "It wasn't darkspawn. Assassins. Stabbed him in the back."

Bronwyn stopped in her tracks, horrified, an image of her bleeding, dying father in her mind's eye. "Assassins?" she hissed back. "Did you capture them?"

"They're dead." He shrugged. "They were pretty good." He grinned mischievously, his eyes traveling to Zevran, who was chatting with great fire and animation with Tara and Brosca. "No yelling that 'Teyrn Loghain dies here!' or anything of that sort. They just came out of nowhere and one of them stuck Loghain with a poisoned stiletto. You could hardly see the hilt. How it missed killing him is anybody's guess. We had to get his armor off to pry out the blade. Anyway, he went down and I saw it and I bashed one and whacked the other. Ser Cauthrien is looking into who they were. We don't know much right now."

"Maker's Breath!" She tugged on his arm. "Come on! Somebody gets us something to eat while everybody else starts talking!"

"Wait." Alistair caught her forearm and pulled her close. "Someone's got to tell you. Arl Howe is dead. He was killed by Crow Assassins the day your brother took his castle. Howe's son and daughter too. Your brother sent word to the Queen and she sent couriers south right away. They must have passed you while you were with the Dalish. So Amaranthine was taken and your brother was fine the last we heard. I know it's a lot to take in, but I knew you'd want to know right away."

"You're right." She swayed a little, and leaned on her trusty Senior Warden. "It's such a shock."

"Kind of a good one, isn't it?" he whispered anxiously.

"Yes... it's just... yes." She managed a brief smile. "The man who murdered my parents is dead. That's good, of course. Fergus is safe. That's even better. I just need some time to take it all in." She tried to understand the news. Howe's son and daughter? Surely not! Delilah was almost certainly innocent...

But no more innocent than Oriana and Oren, of course. What a cruel place the world was.

Between them, Brosca and Ogren yelled loudly enough for trays of tankards and bowls of stew to make their appearance as if by magic. Once those were passed around – and everyone was happy to join the travelers in an afternoon snack – Bronwyn readied herself to catch up on the news. Anders and Morrigan slipped into the room and nodded to her. Cullen was in the act of shutting the

door, when Carver Hawke made his appearance, escorting Adaia back to the safety of the Wardens' headquarters. With them was a handsome man who resembled Carver. A handsome man indeed. Bronwyn's eyes were caught by the charming, insouciant smile and the muscular arms and shoulders, set off attractively by the man's brown leather jerkin. With him was a big, well-brushed mabari. Scout trotted over to sniff the newcomer, who grinned doggily, apparently glad to meet another of his breed.

"And who is this?" Bronwyn asked, ready to be friendly with friends of her Wardens. She set aside her empty bowl, and focused on this new addition. Anders caught Morri-gan's eye and gave her a wink.

Torn between pride and jealousy, Carver made the introductions.

"Warden-Commander," he said, "this is my older brother, Adam Hawke. Adam, this is the Commander of the Grey in Ferelden, Lady Bronwyn Cousland!"

The handsome warrior bowed gracefully. "My lady," he murmured, in a most pleasantly resonant baritone. With a sly grin, he added, "Hunter and I are glad to make the acquaintance both of you and the famous Scout."

Bronwyn smiled. That a mabari had chosen him spoke well of his character. "'Warden' will do," she told him, "or 'Commander.' Have you come to join us?"

Adam paused, admiring the attractive young woman with the unusual green eyes. He was an observant man,

and caught the curious way she said the word "joined," almost capitalizing it. Of course, joining the Grey Wardens was a grave undertaking.

"No... Commander," was the modest and manly reply. "Carver is the adventurer of the family. I have come down to see how he was..."

"He's been going out on patrol with us, Bronwyn," Alistair broke in. "He's good."

"He's the head of his family," Leliana said gently. "He is responsible for a mother, a sister, a cousin, and an invalid uncle." She gave Bronwyn a speaking look, which was understood instantly to mean that there was much more to say on the matter.

Not at all abashed, Adam said, "In fact, Commander, I was hoping to obtain your help in finding a position. Not with the Grey Wardens, but with anyone else of your acquaintance who could use a loyal officer."

He was very charming, but Bronwyn was not particularly thrilled to be put on the spot on her arrival – not when there were so many other issues claiming her attention. Still, he was Carver's brother, and had a mabari friend...

"I know heaps of people," she told him. "I'm sure I can come up with something. Let me give it some thought."

She noticed that Adam stayed with them through their meeting, just as Zevran and Oghren and Sten did. Her Wardens clearly thought well of him.

"All right!" She lifted a hand. "I have things to say and I

want to hear from you. To make the big news official: yes, we did find the other Dalish clan, and yes, they did agree to come to Ostagar to fight. We also ended up going to Denerim, and more about that later. What I want to hear now is what I *don't* know: all the news from Ostagar since I left, and the news from Denerim which I missed in my time among the Dalish. Senior Warden, report!"

She had used her time well on the return to Ostagar, thinking over how to make this informal association of Blight-fighters a more structured organization. First, she must make clear the bones of that structure: she was their Commander, Alistair was her second-in-command. There were other roles to be assigned, but this was a start.

Rising to his feet, Alistair blushed and grinned, and then gave a little formal bow.

"The Dalish arrived shortly after you left, and they've made a real difference. They're led by Keeper Merrill, and the King thinks a lot of her. Teyrn Loghain was really pleased to find some of his old friends among them, from the days of the Rebellion when he commanded the Night Elves. We've been able to penetrate to the big chasms the darkspawn have opened up. One of them is big enough for the Archdemon, and we're working on ways to damage it. We went out to the old Grey Warden outpost and skirmished with the darkspawn there. Some of us thought it might be nice someday to rebuild it and have a place in the Wilds for training and... stuff..."

There were chuckles, and Alistair shrugged off his lack of eloquence. "And we had quite the adventure today, trying out an idea of Teyrn Loghain's. The dwarves rigged a dry streambed west of here and we were able to lure a pretty good-sized band of darkspawn out to chase us. The darkspawn couldn't resist a chance to hunt Wardens," he said, giving Bronwyn a meaning look. She nodded, understanding, and he went on. "Maybe Teyrn Loghain got the idea from what happened at the big battle in Bloomingtide, when the darkspawn targeted us. Anyway, this time we were ready for them. They were funneled down the valley and were caught in the traps. The Dalish took them out with arrows, and the dwarves disarmed the traps that were still active, so they wouldn't hurt anyone else. Completely wiped out the darkspawn, or at least that's what I'm told. Anders and I were helping Teyrn Loghain at that point. In all the confusion, these two soldiers came out of nowhere and one of them stabbed Loghain. I just happened to be looking his way that moment, because I was really pleased with how it was going, and I wanted to see if he was pleased, too. He was, and he didn't see the men coming up behind him. So I got to the assassins and there was a fight, and I killed them, and Loghain isn't very pleased about that. We don't know who they were working for."

"— but we can *guess*," Cullen put in, his face stony. "It was a cowardly, despicable attack."

"Hey! *I* can't guess," Oghren rumbled. "Who did it?"

"Somebody with a real gift for poisons," Anders said, "or who knows somebody who does. Luckily, the stuff was a little too old, and I'm guessing they misjudged the dosage for a man as big as Teyrn Loghain. Zevran! Do the Crows do anything with deep mushroom and scoriata?"

"No," Zevran spread his hands. "That is unknown to me. It sounds very vile."

"Most people would guess the Orlesians," Bronwyn said, frowning. "They would be the obvious culprits: they would have much to gain by killing Ferelden's greatest general when the country is under attack."

It was unnecessary to add that Loghain had plenty of other enemies. There were many in the Landsmeet who still bitterly resented that a commoner had been granted a teyrnir, just as they resented that commoner's daughter being Queen. Loghain had made many of them look shabby, pitiful, and incompetent during the Rebellion. His military talents had appeared out of nowhere, when the fortunes of the rebels were at their lowest ebb. He had been King Maric's greatest weapon against the Orlesians — he and Rowan, Maric's future queen, of course. Yes, it would not be beyond the realm of possibility that a disaffected noble would do this, even with the country under attack. People could be selfish, stupid creatures.

"Ser Cauthrien is looking into it," Alistair said. "The assassins were with Bann Loren's men, so they're all being

questioned."

"Bann Loren!" Bronwyn thought about it. He was the husband of her mother's unhappy friend, Lady Landra. She had never liked the man: not many did. He had never seemed to care whether he was liked or not; not even by his wife or son. What was his part in all this? Or had the assassins simply chosen at random? Some of the banns were not very particular about the soldiers they recruited.

Alistair shrugged. "So that's all we know about that for now. We had some dispatches from Denerim. I told you some of that, Bronwyn. Arl Rendon Howe is dead, and your brother took Vigil's Keep. It looks like the Arl was killed by Crow assassins. I didn't tell you this, but it looks like they were hired by the mother of your brother's wife."

"Oriana's mother!" It took Bronwyn's breath away for a moment. It was something startling and unexpected. "Lady Fortuny?"

"Ah!" Zevran's pointed ears positively perked up. "Your brother's wife was a Fortuny? I am impressed. They do indeed have connections with the Crows. It is all very ironic." He smiled. Irony did not much disturb him.

Bronwyn tried to find something good in all this misery. "At least the country will now be united. I daresay Fergus will want to pacify Amaranthine and then drive out the last of Howe's men in Highever." He would have to go home and see Highever Castle and the horrors visited upon them there. Surely Howe's men had disposed of the



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bodies and washed the blood from the stones...

Alistair cleared his throat, and glanced over to Adaia. "And while you were gone, Bann Vaughan was killed by the darkspawn."

"By the darkspawn?" Tara burst out excitedly. "Serves him right!"

Some laughter followed. Bronwyn asked, "How did it happen?"

"It was because of me," Adaia croaked out. She ducked her head and muttered, "Well, it was."

Alistair scowled. "We're keeping that bit among ourselves. Teyrn Loghain figured it out, but nobody else knows that Vaughan and two of his friends grabbed Adaia when she was at work and dragged her out to the forest to — hurt her. Before they could get far, the darkspawn showed up and killed them. Adaia got away —"

"I ran and ran!" Adaia declared.

"Good for you," Bronwyn managed. This must certainly be causing a stir. The Arl of Denerim's son and heir killed...

"Anyway," Alistair said. "I was gone at the time, but Cullen and Morrigan and Brosca found out she was gone, and they followed and found her. Once she was safe, they tracked the darkspawn down and wiped them out. Vaughan and his pals were a mess. Everybody else thinks they were up to something disgusting out there in the woods: so," he grinned, "it's absolutely *ruined* his reputation —"

"Oh, cry me a river," scoffed Brosca.

Astrid thought of something else. "Your cousin was



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betrotted to this Vaughan, was she not? You were concerned for her. Now, it seems, she is quite safe."

"That's true," Tara said. "That's another good thing." Danith nodded, in complete agreement. It would have been horrible, even for a shemlen woman, to be married to such a creature.

Bronwyn's breath was rather taken away, imagining Habren's reaction to the loss of Vaughan and her upcoming nuptials. All past tantrums would be eclipsed by her response to this blow. Bronwyn bit her lip, fighting inappropriate laughter. It was mean. Yes, it was mean of her. It was taking a shameful delight in the misfortunes of others. Habren had *liked* Vaughan. On the other hand, anyone who could like a disgusting rapist and murderer had something seriously wrong with her... So Habren would not be having her wedding. Bronwyn bit her lip again, forcing herself to think of serious things.

"So you are safe from Vaughan, Adaia. That is good news indeed. His plots will no longer endanger you or distract from the war against the Blight. With his death, and the death of Arl Howe, the country is now united against the Blight. The Blight is the real danger. That is what brings us together in this place. We must be committed to the mission. To that end, I have given some thought to our own situation. As we bring more recruits into the Wardens, we must be prepared. That is to say, as our order grows larger, we need structure and discipline as well as the bonds of



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friendship and trust we develop as we serve together.”

With that introduction, she laid out her future expectations. Some were already entirely with her. Cullen and Carver – and Astrid – were nodding in agreement.

She said, “I am your Warden-Commander. Alistair is Senior Warden. After that seniority is determined by Joining date. Since a number of people joined on the same day, I will also take date of joining our company into consideration. There is also the position of Senior Warden Mage to be appointed – ”

Anders, alarmed, called out, “I don’t want to be in charge of anything!”

Bronwyn frowned at him. “I shall take your wishes into consideration. You and Tara joined our company nearly at the same moment. Tara is therefore Senior Warden Mage. You may not wish to be in charge, Anders, but Tara is, and you will follow her orders.”

“I guess I can do that,” Anders allowed. Morrigan sneered a little, not because she disliked Tara – she did not – but because the idea of following orders was odious to her.

Tara, not surprisingly, was thrilled. “I’ll be the best Senior Warden Mage ever!” Congratulations followed Bronwyn’s announcement. Bronwyn was pleased, herself. She had more faith in Tara’s commitment to the Wardens than in Anders’.

“I have no doubt you will be,” Bronwyn said. “Now to less pleasant issues. We all need to understand what is



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expected of us. I will speak first to our brave friends who are not Wardens, and who serve with us as volunteers. If the day comes that you grow weary of our company, I have no authority to keep you against your will. I do hope, however, that you will not depart at a critical moment. While you remain with us, I expect you to follow orders. If you do not, we will not pay you. If you are particularly obstreperous, you will not remain among us.”

“Fair enough,” Oghren called back.

Zevran grinned wickedly. “I am yours to command, Fair One. And, it appears, everyone else’s as well!”

“Sten?” Bronwyn asked.

The Qunari’s face knit together in ponderous thought. “Yes. Discipline is essential. I shall follow your commands, until your commands are contrary to the Qun. Then I shall give notice.”

That was the most she could hope for, she supposed. Her eyes drifted to the handsome Adam Hawke. He grinned back at her.

“For the time I’m here, I have no problem with that.”

“And Morrigan?”

“I shall follow reasonable suggestions. I can promise no more than that. I trust my service has not been lacking hitherto?”

“Not at all,” said Bronwyn, inwardly wanting to give Morrigan a good, hard shake. “Adaia?”

“I want to be a Warden,” Adaia croaked, very firmly. “Tell me about the hard stuff.”

"Very well. I shall talk about the Wardens themselves. Grey Wardens are sworn to the order, and my expectations of their conduct are therefore higher. Here are the basics."

She took a deep breath, and recited the words she had practiced in her mind for the past two days. "Refusal to obey a direct order will be considered insubordination. Insubordination is also conduct contrary to a superior's officer's clear purpose. Such an infraction will be punished. The first occurrence will be met with loss of pay, the amount depending on the seriousness of the offense. Further infractions will be punished by confinement to quarters, flogging, or execution, in that order. A combination of punishments may also be imposed. I do not wish to dwell on punishments for cowardice. All of you have proved your courage. However, desertion in the face of the enemy can happen for many reasons; some of them having nothing whatever to do with courage or cowardice. This offence will also be punished, depending on the seriousness of the situation, and whatever mitigating circumstances may apply."

A brief, impressed silence followed. Carver's eyes were quite wide, and he was not the only one taken aback.

"Whoa!" Alistair breathed. "I mean – it makes sense. It's pretty much what Duncan told us."

Danith gathered her courage and stood up. She too, had had much to think about in the past few days. She could not like shemlens. She did not like the Warden-

Commander. However, she must uphold the honor of the Dalish in this strange place.

"The Warden-Commander is forced to speak plainly because of me. My conduct and actions among the clan of Zathrian were lacking in honor and good sense. When presented with a conflict between loyalty to a Dalish Keeper and loyalty to the Warden-Commander, I chose poorly. My actions brought me shame and sorrow, and I have apologized to the Commander and my other companions on the mission. I apologize to all of you now."

Very pleased, but also feeling a bit awkward, Bronwyn replied, "Bravely said. I appreciate your forthrightness and self-examination. You will not be paid for the Satalia quarter, and the matter is otherwise at an end." To forestall the murmuring and gossip that rose up around them, she said, "I would prefer that nothing more be said of this. Instead, I wish each of you to consider *privately* how you would respond if forced to choose between the Grey Wardens and something else that you hold dear. Our mission is clear – to destroy the darkspawn. Everything else must come second to that."

She knew herself to be a horrible hypocrite. Yes, she would do her duty and fight the darkspawn, but it was a fight complicated by family loyalty and loyalty to her native land. Indeed, she had chosen already, for the First Warden had ordered her to leave Ferelden and she had disregarded him. On the other hand, she was not entirely

convinced that loyalty to the Grey Warden mission and loyalty to the First Warden were one and the same...

"I will also tell you more of our adventures, and this must not be spoken of outside this room."

Everyone nodded, even Sten, so she went on. Something of this was bound to leak, and it was better to have it in the open.

"In addition to visiting the Dalish, we went to Denerim. I wished to consult with the Master-Armourer Wade about dragon-fighting equipment. He had some interesting ideas, which I will be glad to share with you later on. Jowan has remained in Denerim for the time being, because he could use the libraries there to research the tactics of the Nevarran dragon-hunters. I also had a letter for the Queen. And I overheard you whispering about this already, but yes, Tara, Zevran, and Danith visited the Alienage, and it appears that Adaia has a new cousin."

"Who?" Adaia croaked out, excited. "Who had a baby? Was it Eleria? Was it Trianni?"

"No!" Tara was grinning. "It's me! I mean, it's not me who had a baby! It's me who's your cousin! Really. Hahren Valendrian showed me his records. We're second cousins. Isn't that something?"

"You're my *cousin*? You're one of *those* Suranas?"

"Yes! I'm Nessa's sister!" Tara bubbled "It's so exciting! I never had relatives before!"

Bronwyn indulged the squeals and gossip, and wished

she could tell them the rest of the news from Denerim, but it was simply too dangerous. Tara, Danith, Zevran, and Astrid had all been sworn to secrecy about the attempt on Anora's life. Bronwyn had decided she would tell Alistair, but no one else.

Instead, she blew out a breath, and smiled. "On that note, it seems appropriate that I bought presents for everyone!"

Bronwyn took some trouble with her appearance, getting ready for dinner. There was no chance of a real bath, but the servants brought enough hot water to wash very thoroughly. She unwrapped her new bar of lavender-scented soap, and the lathering and splashing – and her wicked satisfaction at Habren's discomfiture – put her in a very good mood. Her Grey Warden gown was quite a hit with the other women of the party. Adaia stoked the fabric and insisted on helping lace it up.

"It's shiny," she admired.

"You look like a queen," Brosca said, unusually sober. "Like the Queen of the Wardens." Unable to keep her fingers to herself, she reached out to touch the embroidery. "That must be the fanciest gown in the world!"

"It very likely boasts the largest griffon ever embroidered on a piece of apparel," Morrigan remarked, one brow arching.

"Meow!" Bronwyn laughed at her, not put out in the least.

"I would not choose grey for you, but what lovely, lovely

velvet!" Leliana bubbled. "The finest to be had in Val Royeaux! And it fits, too! It fits perfectly."

"That was Mistress Rannelly's doing," Bronwyn smiled. "And the gown is twenty years old."

"Who would know?" Leliana shrugged. "Is that the belt? Put it on!"

Tara had to tell them about the Compound, and about the niceness of Mistress Rannelly. Danith, when applied to, agreed quietly that the housekeeper was a most hospitable woman, and a purveyor of wholesome nourishment.

Tara laughed at her. "It was lovely. Danith makes it sound so serious! You're all going to love it at the Wardens' Compound. The bedchambers are so comfortable, and we have our own Great Hall with a long table and portraits and everything. And our own kitchen, and our own laundry, and so much hot water that you can have a bath whenever you like!"

Astrid was calmer in her praise, but she too had enjoyed her stay. "All the more reason to defeat the Blight, and then savor the Compound's many delights. By then, we'll certainly have earned them."

"What was all that noise?" Loghain asked, waking reluctantly from a healing sleep.

Wynne hurried to his side and gave him another potion. "I believe, your lordship, that the Warden-Commander has returned."

That roused him a bit. He grimaced at the bitterness of the medicine and then grunted, "I want to see her."

"I think you will be able to get up for dinner. Perhaps then—"

"I want to see her *now*," Loghain growled, struggling up to a sitting position. "I'm fine."

"You're not *fine*..."

"I'm better." More civilly, he said, "I thank you for all your care. Your talents have made all the difference in this campaign, and not just for me."

"You are most gracious."

"Hmph. Have someone fetch Bronwyn. I want her report."

Wynne sighed, and gave the quiet servant waiting in the corner a nod. "Very well. I'm sure she'll be here just as soon as she can."

"Give me a clean shirt, then."

In fact, Bronwyn arrived almost immediately, smiling with anticipation and frowning in concern. The combined expression looked rather odd. It felt odd on her face, too, and she tried to wipe it away into a more bland countenance. She cast a friendly smile Wynne's way, which helped. Loghain was slumped in a chair, looking very grumpy, but his eyes were intent on her.

"My lord. I am relieved to see you up. Anders was very impressed by the poison used by the assailants."

"I'm *fine*," Loghain insisted, glowering at Wynne. "But I'm thirsty. It must be the ghastly potions I've been ingesting all day."



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"You may have one cup of wine," Wynne generously permitted, pouring for him.

"I thank you. The Warden-Commander and I need to talk in private."

Wynne pursed her lips, not liking to leave her testy patient unattended. "I'll be just outside," she whispered to Bronwyn. "Don't let him overexert himself." She hustled the servant out ahead of her and the door shut.

"Bloody woman. Thinks she's my mother." Loghain waved Bronwyn over, and pointed at the footstool in front of his chair. He downed the wine while Bronwyn seated herself, mindful of her velvet.

Loghain noticed it and his black brows met over his high-bridged nose as he studied her appearance. "What's that you have on? I thought you didn't have a gown."

"This old thing? It's been in the Wardens' attics for years and years. Actually, twenty years. That's when Commander Genevieve brought it with her from Orlais. She apparently never had a chance to wear it, though. If you wish to mock the very large griffon on the front, you are behindhand, because Morrigan has already held it up to ridicule very thoroughly."

He snorted, and took her hand in his big one, his thumb caressing her palm in a startling exciting way. "Your report, Commander? How did Anora take the news of Cailan's double-dealing?"

"Bravely. It was a dreadful shock, of course, but she is



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soldiering on..."

"And the Dalish?" He squeezed her hand, and kissed it lightly.

Was he trying to throw her off-balance? He was doing an awfully good job of it, wounded as he was. She decided that two could play that game. Her free hand touched his stubbly jaw and she leaned close to kiss him sweetly. He seemed to like it very much. If he had been entirely himself, he probably would have delayed the rest of her report. But he was not quite himself, and Bronwyn sat back, a little more confident. Her heart fluttered a little, remembering the truly terrible news she must give him, but she would try to soften it as best she could.

"More Dalish are joining us. I found the clan of Keeper Zathrian. It is now the clan of Keeper Lanaya, and she will be here with her people within the month."

"You didn't have to recruit a Warden to win her favor?"

"I had to do *plenty* to win the clan's favor, but I got no Wardens from it. It was ridiculously complicated, but now it's done. I met with Master Wade in Denerim, and he had some very interesting ideas, including a harpoon-like ballista bolt, which could be used to entangle and disable a dragon. Jowan is remaining in Denerim to research dragon-hunting lore, among other things."

"Ah. Have you been given the news about Howe?"

She smiled tightly. "I have. I know that he is dead and that Delilah and Thomas were murdered with him. It seems so cruel and unnecessary. It's certainly not what I wanted."

"Nor your brother, from his avowals to Anora. He sent her a hasty note. Apparently he's looking into some other of Howe's misdeeds, but Anora wrote that she would say more about them once they could be definitely confirmed."

"Other misdeeds?"

"I daresay some other murders he was involved in. I'm willing to swear that the man never willingly or knowingly had dealing with the Orlesians."

"Perhaps not." Bronwyn was willing to let it go, now that the man was dead. "Perhaps he did not, but certainly others have." She gestured at his shoulder with her free hand. "That was a present from our western neighbors, don't you think?"

"Probably. Bastards. It's not the first time they've tried to kill me."

"Loghain..." She must tell him, here and now, when they were quiet and alone. He must have time to compose himself before others saw him. "Loghain...as you know, I met with the Queen..." She had thought about how to tell him, but nothing she had invented was good enough.

His face changed. "What is it? You said she took it well enough."

"I said that she was brave. As it happened, the news was not the only thing she had to bear. I visited, and we talked, and during that conversation, something quite awful came to light. She put it in her letter that I was to bring to you." She pulled the folded parchment from her pocket, reluctant

for him to see it and be hurt." "We're keeping it as quiet as possible. Before you read it, I want you know that she was in good spirits when I left, and Jowan remained to help..."

"What has happened?" he snarled. Dropping her hand, he seized the letter, unfolded it, and scanned it quickly, his face taut with fury and anguish.

My dear Father —

Bronwyn has no doubt assured you that I am much better than I was when she first met with me. That is true. I hesitate to write these words, for you are certain to say "I told you so!"

Erlina, my trusted Erlina, was a spy, and had been for years. I discovered that she had been poisoning my tea for some time. Had Bronwyn not been there, it is likely she would have succeeded and escaped. Luckily, Bronwyn was there when Erlina was exposed, and knocked her down with one blow. I had been feeling so very ill and weak, and I believed it was some sickness. That was the plan, Erlina confessed. I was to fall into a decline, and no longer be in the way of the grand schemes of others...

He read it all, and then read it again. If Cailan had stepped into the room at that moment, Loghain would have killed him, whether he was wounded or not; whether Cailan was King or not. The idea that Cailan might have been a party to this was so painful that Loghain groaned aloud, and then tossed the letter aside and dropped his head into his hands. Bronwyn laid her hand on his arm, and gave him time to pull himself together.

"Bastard Orlesians," Loghain growled, sick at heart at

what had been done to his child. There would be blood for this. That they had attacked him was nothing: a soldier grew used to people trying to kill him in all sorts of ways. But that they would seek Anora's life, for their convenience... "You should have brought that bitch to me."

Gently, Bronwyn said, "The Queen commanded otherwise. I believe we got all we could hope to get from her, and it gave Her Majesty some comfort and closure to know that Erlina would harm no one else."

"I suppose." He rubbed his hand over his face. His shoulder ached a bit, and he rubbed that too, grimacing. "She didn't hint at the attack on me, I take it?"

"No." Bronwyn wondered about that a little, and then said. "It's entirely possible that she would have known nothing about it. It would be safer, surely, to keep that plot as secret as possible. I suspect the Empress has yet more little schemes in store for us, but the worst have been thwarted, so far."

Loghain sighed. "Anora..." His voice trailed away. "Anora said she felt all right once that fellow Jowan worked some healing magic. Did she *look* better?"

"Much, much better. He agrees, though, that Wynne is the best choice to treat the Queen."

"I'll see to it. Wynne's a good sort, for all her fussing." He picked up the letter again and smoothed it out, hissing at the pain in his shoulder. "What's this Urn of Sacred Ashes nonsense that Anora's writing about?"

"It's not nonsense — not entirely, at least. We met a respected scholar near Lake Calenhad. Brother Genetivi is his name. He believes that that Andraste's funerary temple is out in the Frostbacks. His researches indicated that there is a village called Haven where he might find people who knew the exact location. I think there might be something to it, because someone is certainly interested in suppressing the information. When I was in Denerim, I went to call on this scholar, to see if he returned home safely. He had not, and there was someone pretending to be his assistant, rifling through his papers. He had killed the real assistant some time before. I took the notes and the other maps, and have them in my possession."

"Show me the map."

She had expected this, and had brought it along. Spreading it out on his lap, she said, "I brought everything else with me to Ostagar, too. It's in my saddlebag."

"Just the map for now."

His fingertips traced eagerly over everything unfamiliar to him. "Haven," he grunted. "Never heard of it. It's on the Fereldan side of the Frostbacks, though, so it's rightfully ours. They should be paying taxes. I suppose it might be considered part of Redcliffe...no...I don't think there's any overlord out there. Interesting..."

It was interesting. Where there was a population center, there was a potential bannorn he could use as a reward for an outstanding soldier. Or Cailan could, properly primed.

If they all survived the Blight, he wanted Cauthrien to have land of her own and a place in the Landsmeet...

"And Honnleath...I've not heard of that place either. Perhaps I'll go and have a look someday. So," he said, sitting back, "this Genetivi was going to Haven to find out about the Urn. No word of him since? Not even at the Cathedral?"

"I fear not. I went there, of course, when I interviewed Mother Boann about Adaia. She was telling the exact truth, by the way, though it's a moot point now. Anyway, as to Genetivi: he has friends at the Cathedral, but they've had no word of him since his journey west. I fear the worst, but I did warn him."

"It's all rather... far-fetched... don't you think?"

"I don't know," Bronwyn considered. "There was certainly an Andraste. Chantry lore tells us her faithful gathered her ashes. That much I think we can accept as true. Obviously not all her followers were killed, or there would be no Andrasteans today. It only makes sense that they would have honored her remains. It's possible that a party carrying them into the safety of the mountains might have met with misfortune, but it's also possible that they did not. The odd part of the story, I grant, is that the world does not know of this temple. Perhaps there was division amongst the followers... some sort of dispute about how the remains should be bestowed. As Haven is not in the Anderfels or Par Vollen, but here in Ferelden, I don't see it as either impossible or inappropriate to investigate these clues."

Something unpleasant occurred to Loghain. "It is... possible... that the Chantry knows of this place and is trying to keep it secret. Perhaps they've known of it for years. Not the rank-and-file, of course, but the Divine and the high clerics. I've heard of Genetivi. He's been in trouble with them in the past for printing things they didn't care for."

That was a frightening thought, and the Divine was based in Orlais... Bronwyn considered it and shook her head. "I think if the Chantry were behind it, it would have been managed much more efficiently. There wouldn't have been just the one spy in the house, and the dead body would already have been disposed of. The Chantry could seal the house, anyway. I don't think the Orlesians are involved, either. If they thought they could lay hands on the Urn, they would have sent a far more experienced and dangerous agent. No. I don't think either the Chantry or the Orlesians knows about this."

Loghain considered it too. "Good. Let's keep it that way. Can your Wardens be trusted not to talk?"

Bronwyn felt a little nervous about that. Cullen and Leliana were so devout. "Only Tara was with me when I searched the house and killed the spy. She's extremely reliable. I did talk to my recent party about keeping this quiet. No one but me has read the notes or seen the maps. I'll tell everyone again that they are not to discuss anything that happened in Denerim with outsiders."

Loghain leaned over the map again, fixing it all in his

mind. "Intriguing. Fereldan soil. It seems...appropriate. I'm serious about not wanting this rumor spread about. The Chantry would claim it as a religious foundation."

"I understand."

"If there's a way to heal Anora, we must have it. My daughter will keep her life and her throne. Every scheme of that bitch Celene will be thwarted. We will defeat the Blight, and Cailan..."

There was a something in his face that Bronwyn had not seen before – or at least not when the son of his old friend was the topic of conversation. "Cailan.." he growled, the word bitter in his mouth.

"He may know nothing of any of this, Loghain," Bronwyn counseled him. "Nothing of the attack on you, and nothing of the poisoning of Anora. If I were Celene, I would tell him nothing at all."

"His ignorance makes him no less culpable," Loghain said grimly. "It's his dabbling in secret diplomacy that encouraged the Orlesians to do their worst."

"Yes, but we can't be the ones to say anything about it. We've succeeded in keeping the attack on Anora secret. Just as the Orlesians have no idea that Marjolaine is dead and the marriage treaty miscarried, they do not know that Erlina is not still at her poisoning in the Palace. In a few weeks some agent may report that the Queen is still alive and healthy, and they will investigate, but I see no reason to tip our hands." With a wry smile, she said, "At the moment,

your face, my lord, is a book that even our king could read."

He grunted at that, looking very weary. He folded the letter and then, the map. "Put these in the box over there," he said, pulling a key from a pocket. "And lock them up."

She did, protesting only a little. "It's my map."

"It's secret Fereldan intelligence. I'll give you another map. We know today of two Orlesian spies in the army. I can only presume there are more."

That was an alarming thought, but obviously true. The Empress was fabulously rich, and could afford many agents, most of whom probably knew nothing of the others' existence. And there was still the possibility of the King's involvement...

"Really," she said, almost to herself. "We'll have to be very polite to the King. A thousand dangers may beset us on every side, but we'll have to smile 'like innocent flowers,' as my mother used to say."

Loghain snorted a sour laugh. "If I smiled like an 'innocent flower' at him, he'd know his days were numbered. You'll have to settle for the usual bad temper, and so will he. Now come back here to me."

Welcoming back the Girl Warden was made into something of an occasion. A rather festive dinner was readied for the King, the Wardens, and the leaders of the armies. Bronwyn came down with Loghain to find King Cailan's behavior to her was somewhat cooler than in the past. His eyes wid-

ened a bit at her newly green eyes and her long scar, but he said nothing about them, which was fine with her.

She also found that the place of honor at His Majesty's side was now occupied by the fey and fragile Dalish Keeper Merrill. On the other side was the dwarven commander, Lord Piotin Aeducan. It was appropriate enough, Bronwyn granted.

Merrill seemed unaware of any tension. She greeted Bronwyn in a most friendly way, and introduced her to her loyal advisors, Maynriel and Thanovir. "And they are old friends of Teyrn Loghain, too."

That seemed to be true. Loghain was at his ease with the greying elves, and they with him. It was a glimpse of his past to see him with some of his Night Elves.

Cailan leaned forward to ask Bronwyn about her travels. "Bronwyn! I do hope that your dealings with the other Dalish went smoothly. With... let's see... Keeper Zathrian's clan?"

Bronwyn smiled, picturing herself as an innocent flower. "It is now Keeper Lanaya's clan. Keeper Zathrian is, alas, no more."

"Oh!" cried Merrill, huge eyes moist and wistful. "What a pity! He'd been their Keeper so long! Was it a sudden illness?"

Further down the table, Tara bit back a snort. "Pretty sudden." Zevran hid a grin. Astrid grimaced, and speared another slice of mutton. Danith was miserably reliving it all.

Loghain said dryly. "Perhaps it did not go *quite* so smoothly."

Bronwyn did not want to get into the whole awful story, lest she grow angry again. "Keeper Zathrian's death was a shock to his clan, but Keeper Lanaya has promised hunters. They should be arriving in a sevenday, or a little more."

Danith added, "The Dalish are true to their oaths. They will come."

"All the same," Tara persisted. "I wouldn't call it *smooth*. Not with an ancient elven temple, and curses and werewolves, and undead phantoms, and a dragon. And Bronwyn had to swim underwater to find the werewolves' lair. That was pretty horrible."

There was a growing stir at the tables, as people stared, their attention caught by "curses," "werewolves," and "a dragon."

"A dragon," Bryland nodded, unsurprised. "Bronwyn killed it, I expect."

Not wanting to go on about it, Bronwyn tried to wave it off. "It wasn't a very *big* dragon..."

Zevran put in, "The werewolves were the real problem."

Cailan found it all quite exciting. "Werewolves? Really? What were they like?"

He was looking at her, so Bronwyn knew she must answer.

"Big, Your Majesty," she told him. "They were big. Quite impressive."

"Strong and fast," remarked Astrid, reaching for another chicken leg. "They needed no other weapons than their fangs and claws."

"And they could talk – " Tara began, and then saw Bronwyn's tiny headshake. "What? They could talk! It was creepy."

Cailan was entranced. "Well, what did they talk about?" He muttered, "What *would* werewolves talk about?"

"Mostly about how much they hated being werewolves," Bronwyn said. There was laughter, some of it very uneasy.

"Lanaya's very nice, though," Tara remarked. "I think she'll be a very good Keeper. Don't you think so, Danith?"

Without hesitation, Danith agreed. "I believe she will put her duty to the clan first, as a good Keeper should. And she wisely understands that there is no hiding from the Blight in the forest, but that the clan must stand with the other free peoples of Thedas against the danger."

There were polite murmurs of approval from all the tables.

"Well said," Merrill enthused. "Oh, well said!"

"Well said, indeed!" Cailan beamed at the Dalish Warden. She seemed to him just what a Warden should be. "A toast to the alliance!"

The Wardens cheered loudest of all. Loghain glanced at them, and then glanced again, his eye caught by a remarkably handsome man he had not seen before. No. He had, in passing, seen that face today during the battle...

"A new Warden?" he asked Bronwyn, jerking his head in the direction of Adam Hawke.

"No. He's Carver Hawke's brother. He's come to see if his brother is all right... and mostly, I think, to try to get some patronage from me. He's looking for a commission. He's

very nice: very well-bred. That mabari there is his."

Feeling eyes on him, Adam turned and smiled at Bronwyn. It was a remarkably white and engaging smile. The dog smiled, too. Loghain instantly said to her, "Anora wrote something about your brother needing good men in the north. With all the losses at Highever – and now Amaranthine, too..."

"What a good idea!" Bronwyn said, pleased at the suggestion. "Just the thing! Alistair thinks he's quite a sound fighter. I'm sure Fergus will find a use for him."

"Well, that's settled then." Loghain sat back, smiling ever so slightly. "I trust Alistair's judgement. If you like, I can write young Hawke a recommendation, too."

Quite a bit of drinking followed, which did not much trouble Bronwyn, since she was eating enough to offset it. Loghain was careful not to overindulge, and was more interested in observing the antics of the diners, anyway. Cailan, however, was getting a bit pink with the wine. He spoke up, ready to be amused.

"My friend Lord Dace," he said, lifting his cup in salute to the dwarf, "tells me that you Wardens have a custom of telling each other stories. Would it be asking too much if we could hear one tonight? All of us? I should like it of all things."

Bronwyn opened her mouth, ready to negotiate some sort of entertainment, when Adaia, brave after four cups of good red wine, croaked out, "Your turn, Danith!"

Danith knew it was, and had been wondering how to

get out of it since the word "stories," had passed the shemlen king's lips. Escape was impossible. All eyes were turned to her. To try to evade this duty would be cowardice. The shemlen king was friendly to the Dalish and to the Wardens. He must be kept so, for the good of all the People.

The Commander was looking faintly alarmed, as if she expected that Danith would know no stories fit for a shemlen king and his chieftains. Danith would prove her wrong. The story she would tell was not an excuse, but it was a way of explaining herself. She rose to her feet, and bowed gravely in the king's direction. She was actually bowing to Merrill, her Keeper, but the shemlens would not understand that. She raised her voice so that all in the great stone chamber could hear, and know that a Dalish hunter feared them not.

"I shall tell a tale of the elvhen, for those are the stories I know. One of you once asked me 'What is a Keeper?' There are many answers to that question. Our Keepers are obeyed and revered, not only because they are the keepers of our lore and custom, of our heritage and song, but also because they are the Keepers of our people. It is they who keep us from harm: who lead us unscathed through the dangers of forest and plain; who guard us from the dark creatures of both the waking world and that realm beyond which the shemlen call the Fade."

She glanced briefly at Bronwyn, and then at Merrill, and said, ""For countless generations our Keepers have

been our guides and heroes. I shall tell of one of them: the Keeper Iloren."

DANITH'S STORY OF ILOREN, THE DALISH KEEPER

In the days after the rising of the Archdemon Zazikel, the dark ones covered every corner of the land. The Archdemon drove all the nations of the world before him, shemlen and elvhen alike.

In the far north are the lands which the shemlen call the Anderfels. There the hills wander the plains, and the earth is eternally baked beneath the uncaring sun. There, too, a clan of our people once lived, struggling to survive the Blight.

Iloren was their Keeper. A hunter in his younger days, crafty as any wolf, he led his people always just ahead of the darkspawn who chased them. But the old hunter knew that even halla cannot run forever. They must turn and fight, or be run down.

At the foot of the white cliffs of the Merdaine, the darkspawn cornered Iloren's clan. That night, the moon was strangled by clouds. The earth was concealed by a dreadful mist that rose out of nowhere, so that the elvhen could not tell up from down. In the confusion, the darkspawn attacked.

But Iloren had prepared for them. All around the camp, the hunters had strewn dry grass, brush and brambles. When the sound of rustling footfalls began, Iloren and the other hahren called upon the old magic. They struck out with lightning, and though the bolts missed the darkspawn, they hit their target all

the same. The sea of kindling lit, and not one of the dark creatures made it through the fire to reach lloren's clan.

The firestorm raged through the night. The clan clung to the stone of the cliffs, their skins near to blistering from the heat. In the morning, it was over, and the darkspawn dead lay in bone and ash before them, their Taint cleansed by the purifying flames.

Carefully, lloren's clan picked their way among the remains and headed south, finding respite at the little lake they called the Winter Water. There they drank deeply, and there they rested and considered what they should do next. Some were for going south, to join their cousins in the Dales. Others wished to stay in their ancient lands, hoping that they were now free of darkspawn. lloren sat unmoving, deep in thought

At length, he arose and said, "Hear me! Shall we live as hunted beasts all the days of our lives? The Dales lie far to south. To win to them we must face a thousand dangers. The darkspawn are against us this day. Another day it will be the Tevinters, seeking slaves, and yet another it will be the lords of the Anderfels, of Nevarra, of Orlais, ready to quarrel over the dwindling game of the Blighted forests. Let us go west and find a new place, far from the troubles and quarrels of Thedas!"

Many rejoiced at his words, and others shook their heads. Hahren Rhonnar said, "Shall we leave this land, where the elvhen were the first to walk among the trees? Shall we leave the place where Arlathan shone like a star: greater than all cities since its time?"

"I shall leave," answered lloren, "for my purpose is to walk beyond the sunset. Come, my friends, it is not too late to seek a

newer world!"

Thus was the clan divided. One portion elected to travel south to the Dales. Their journey was long and hard; and many died, and many were taken by the darkspawn.

The other elves kept faith with lloren, their Keeper. They turned west, and were last seen struggling up the merciless and cloud-capped slopes of the Hunterhorn Mountains, the wall at the end of the western world. Whether they perished there or found a land beyond is not known. From that day to this, no one has ever had word of what happened to those elves, or to lloren, their Keeper.

Applause and chatter. The elves seemed pleased that their heritage had been honored. Cailan lifted his golden goblet again. "A fine story! I love hearing of the deeds of the elvhen!"

Some of the human nobles took note of that, and there were quiet mutters, too low to be overheard. Loghain's eyes swept over them. Cailan's interest in the beautiful young Keeper Merrill was causing some unpleasant comment. If he had not been so angry at Cailan, he would have taken it upon himself to give the lad some advice. Right now, however, he was sitting very comfortably with Bronwyn at his side, and was content to allow Cailan enough rope to hang himself.

The dwarves liked the story well enough, too, or at least the parts that dealt with killing darkspawn. The dwarves were very fond of stories that involved killing darkspawn.

Lord Piotin Aeducan said, "A clever strategem against

the darkspawn. Fire traps... Isn't that something like the tactics you and the Wardens were trying out today, Teyrn Loghain?"

Cailan answered instead, his face glowing. "Indeed it is! We can learn so much from the old tales!"

Loghain grimaced. More bloody legends and fantasy. Bronwyn caught his eye and smiled mischievously.

People went back to gossip and drinking, but the Wardens still had much to say about the story.

"Beyond the Hunterhorn Mountains," mused Tara, her eyes dreamy. "They say the world ends there, but maybe not. So should the elves have followed Iloren, do you think? I think I would have."

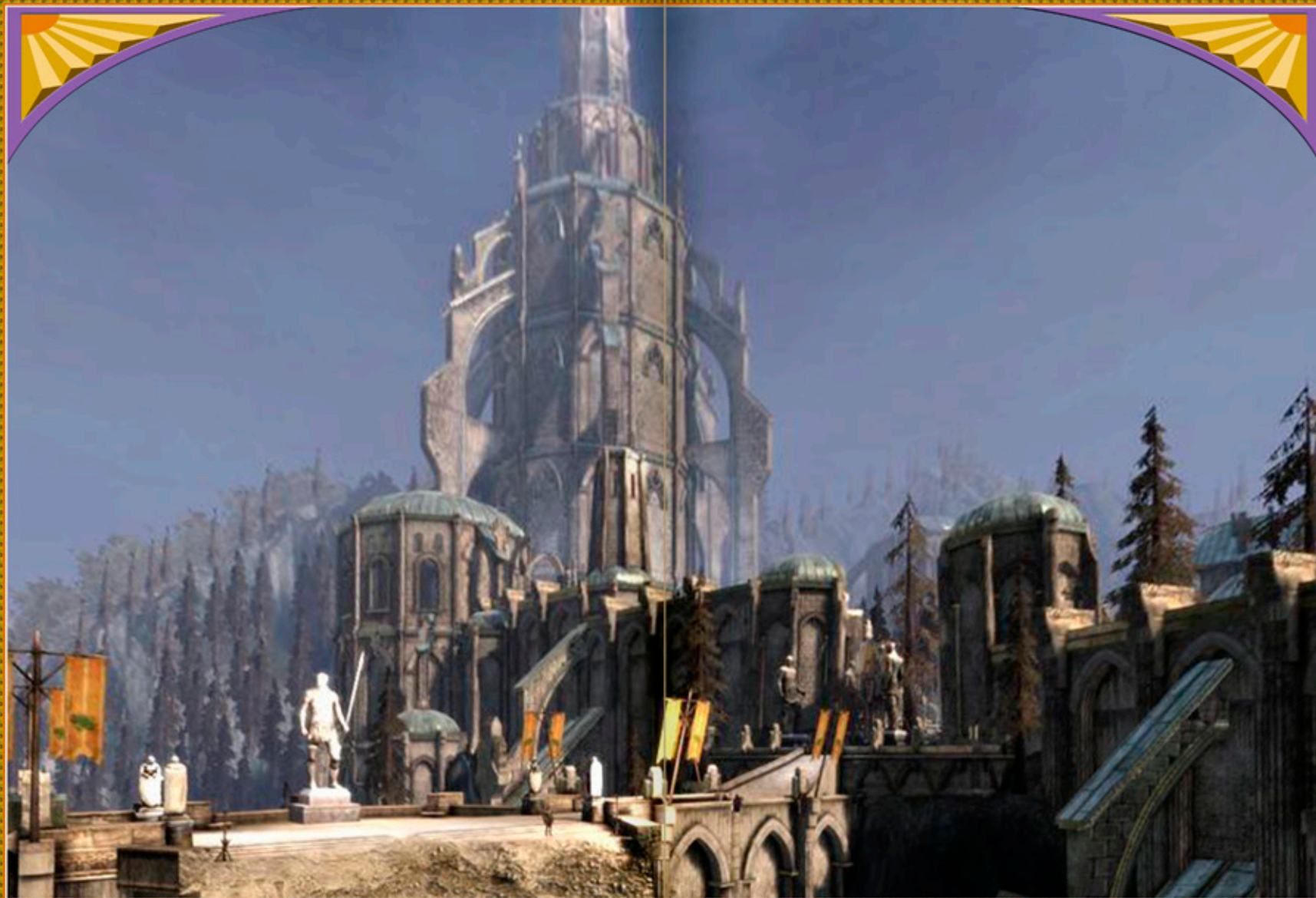
Danith bit her lip and nodded. "That is the crux of the story. Each must answer it for himself. The Dales were known to be a land safe for elves — at least in those days. No one knew — no one knows to this day — if anything lies beyond the Hunterhorn Mountains. Ought one to obey one's Keeper, or judge for himself, using the best knowledge available? Was the Hahren right? Or was Iloren a wise visionary, who led his people to peace and safety in a land known only to elves? My heart has always said that his clan should have followed Iloren, but I do not know if that is the ingrained obedience to a Keeper; or because the situation of elves in Thedas is so difficult and intractable; or even because I love the idea of finding a new land."

Bronwyn was silent, thinking it appropriate to let the elves have their say about an elven story. It was intriguing, though...

the idea of exploring beyond the mountains. Received wisdom said that the western edge of the world ended at the Hunterhorn Mountains and south of them, at the Tirashan. To the north it ended with the jungles of the Donarks and the sea that separated Thedas from the Qunari-held islands of Seheron and Par Vollen. To the south were the frozen wastes beyond the Wilds, too forbidding for even the hardest cartographer. To the east was the limitless Amaranthine Ocean, too powerful and treacherous for safe sailing. Was there an edge where the sea boiled over like a waterfall? That made no sense to her, for then all the water in Thedas would long since have gone. Was there a great wall at the end? Aldous had shown her a scholar's map of Thedas, a rectangle with neat, straight lines enclosing it. That seemed odd, since nothing in nature had neat, straight lines. Perhaps even the highest mountains or the broadest waters held secrets on their far sides...

Zevran considered. "The journey from the Anderfels to the Dales would have been long and perilous indeed. Of course, in those days, the Dalish could not have known that their possession of the Dales would be all too brief. I do not know what I would have done, without knowing Iloren himself. Were he the leader for me, I would have been his man, however mad his vision."

Loghain listened in silence, and then whispered to Bronwyn. "Don't listen to the elves. The Frostbacks are quite far enough."



OSTAGAR: THE ARMY CAMP



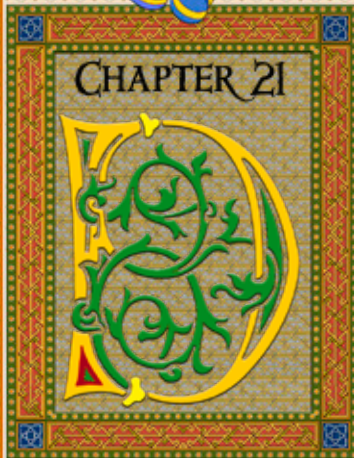
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CHAPTER 21

TESTING THE ALLIANCE



IN LIGHT FROM THE BRAZIER, MORE RED THAN GOLD, ILLUMINATED THE WARDENS' QUARTERS JUST ENOUGH FOR

BRONWYN TO SLIP INSIDE AND FIND HER COT. Scout was next to it, curled up on his blanket and sound asleep. She smiled vaguely, and moved to the other side of the cot to keep from disturbing him.

The velvet gown was discarded for the second time that night. She struggled with the ties to her underskirt, a little muzzy with wine and love and sleep. It was impossible, in this gloom, to fold her good clothes without creasing them. Instead, she draped them carefully over the foot of her cot, and eased herself under them cautiously. With luck, she would have a few hours sleep — if the Archdemon permitted it.

"Did you have a nice conference with Teyrn Loghain?" Leliana asked softly.

Her face burning, and glad of the mask of darkness, Bronwyn managed, "Yes, very nice, thank you," and felt an utter fool. She lay back, her head on one up-flung arm,

and blew out a breath.

Leliana turned on her side and laid a gentle hand on Bronwyn's shoulder. "That's good. As long as he is nice to you."

Bronwyn, tired as she was, huffed with wry laughter. Loghain was many things, and quite of few of them were exciting and stimulating and even very, very pleasurable, but "nice" was not a word that came to mind when she thought of him.

"We're good together," she said. "We get along all right."

The gentle hand patted her shoulder. Bronwyn looked over at Leliana. Even in the dim light, she could make out the sad expression.

The bard murmured, "You deserve much more than 'all right,' my friend. You are young, and beautiful, and brave. Grey Wardens may have forsworn long life, but nothing in our oath compels us to foreswear love."

"It's not like that," Bronwyn whispered, impatient and embarrassed. One didn't just declare one's inmost feelings to the world at large.

"Oh..." Now the bard's fair face was amused. "I see. It is the very upper-class thing of revealing none of the softer emotions to the lower orders. It does not matter if you repeat the words to me, my dear friend, as long as you say them to him. And he to you."

"We don't talk much about *feelings*," Bronwyn muttered. What he said to her before, during, and after was no one else's business. "I've got to sleep now."

Another gentle pat on her shoulder, and the hand was withdrawn. In a few moments, Leliana's breathing changed to the even rhythm of sleep.

At least as even as a Grey Warden's could be. Bronwyn lay awake for some time, listening to the rustles and moans sifting through the smoky chamber. The embers dulled to dark red and the shadows closed in around her. Her eyelids drooped, and like a snap of black lightning, a hurlock rushed past, gibbering.

Bronwyn's eyes blinked open. Distant thunder rolled, and the scent of rain penetrated through the smoke. Brozca whimpered, and Danith thrashed out. Scout "whuffed," his collar making a faint jingling noise. Leliana twitched her head from side to side. Bronwyn sat up and peered over at Astrid, The dark shape of the dwarven princess seemed undisturbed. Astrid had learned to ignore the nightmares better than any of them.

Just a dream. Only the Fade. They were safe for now. Bronwyn lay back down and slept.

Adam Hawke was very pleased at the success of his petition. A few days in Ostagar had accomplished more than months of letters and audiences with Bann Ceorlic.

Bronwyn Cousland drew him aside first thing in the morning and told him of her generous plans.

"Our family lost a lot of loyal supporters when Highever was attacked. I know that my brother needs some good men

to pacify the north. If the idea pleases you, I could give you a letter of recommendation to him. You could travel north with the next courier. My brother is probably either in Amaranthine, or heading west from there to Highever."

Adam smiled warmly, hardly able to believe that his luck had changed at last. Naturally, it would take some time to get to Denerim, let alone Highever. His funds would not run to a horse. It would be a long walk, but a worthwhile one. He might travel slowly, but in comparative comfort and safety, by joining the wagon train that was leaving in a few days, taking the supply wagons to be restocked in South Reach and Denerim. They would be glad of another guard.

He bowed, very gracefully. "My lady, I thank you from the bottom of my heart. An appointment like this will mean the world to my family."

"I am always glad to help my Wardens' families. I shall write the letter tonight. If you get on with my brother the Teyrn, you may wish to consider moving your family to the Coastlands, though I am sure it would be a wrench for your mother to leave her home."

Not if I'm in with the Teyrn of Highever, Adam thought, his imagination on fire with the possibilities. A noble patron would mean better protection for Bethany. He liked the idea of them getting away from Lothering very much. Lothering was only two days from the darkspawn horde, and there had been occasional night raids. A major offen-

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sive could drive the united army back, and leave his little family to the whims of Fate. He would like them to be gone from Lothering as soon as possible.

Carver had been right – though Adam hated to confess it – to be concerned about the journey through the Breilian Passage to Gwaren. Traveling on the Imperial Highway, however, was an entirely different affair. He hoped Uncle Gamlen would either recover enough to bear the journey or not recover at all and cease to be a hindrance. Cousin Charade, of course, was welcome to remain a part of their family. Adam had a great deal of respect for his newly-found cousin.

"Lady Bronwyn, I shall go north with all dispatch. If you have other correspondence, of course, I would be glad to deliver it for you."

"That is most kind," Bronwyn said. "I do have much to say to my brother – and to some others as well."

This was his chance. This was what he had been waiting for all his life. Until her letter of recommendation was safely in his hand, and he was away from Ostagar, he must do everything possible to remain in Lady Bronwyn Cousland's good books. The golden opportunity was tantalizing close, and Adam Hawke would not hesitate to leap at it.

Anora's latest dispatch lay on the table, while the two men in the room debated what was to be done about it.

My dear Father,

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I have news from Fergus Cousland that is now fully confirmed. Shocking as it may sound, we know now that Rendon Howe was financing his plots from the sale of Fereldan elves to Tevinter slavers...

"I can't believe it!" Cailan shook his head again. Loghain hissed impatiently through his teeth. If Cailan shook his head one more time, his brain would probably fall out and roll across the floor.

"Believe it," Loghain said flatly. "Or read Anora's letter again. *We must* brief the senior officers and the allies immediately. *We cannot* allow rumors to reach them first."

Cailan's eyes flickered with panic. "The elves might desert in a body!" He added, in a mutter, "And who could blame them?"

"They'll bloody well certainly desert if we try to keep this a secret. That's already impossible. Fergus Cousland has sent the surviving elves back to the Denerim Alienage. Word will spread. It's probably not a day or two away at this point. We must act first. I'll give the briefing. We'll go ahead and do it before the elves go scouting tomorrow. All you have to do is look grave."

Irritated in his turn, Cailan snapped, "Of course I can look grave! It's monstrous – absolutely monstrous! In Andraste's own country, people being sold like cattle. If only Fergus had succeeded in taking that madman alive!"

"Fergus Cousland is hardly to blame. Howe's schemes are at an end. The slavers' ring is broken and the accom-

plices dead or self-exiled."

"Bann Esmerelle!" Cailan spat. "I never trusted the woman myself. She should be hunted down and made to pay for her crimes..."

Good luck with that, Loghain snarked to himself. Esmerelle had got away with her gold, but she would be a stranger in foreign lands, forever cut off from her home. For himself, Loghain would rather die than be exiled from Ferelden.

"She and her friends are beyond our reach for the moment," he said instead. "It is the *army* that must concern us, Cailan. Fergus seems to be holding the north together. We must keep the alliance strong. Summon the officers and allies and let us tell them the truth. Delay would be fatal. It would give the impression we do not consider the matter to be of any importance, which could cause further offense."

Cailan took a breath. "Yes. You are right. We can apologize —"

"No!" Loghain shouted, and then lowered his voice. "We are not bloody apologizing for Howe! You didn't order him to sell the elves. He was a criminal and a madman, but neither you nor the nation of Ferelden has any culpability for his crimes. To apologize would put us in a false position. You must distance yourself — *distance yourself* — in every way from this ugly business. Point out that Howe was in rebellion against you. Mention his murder of the Cousland family and the new Teyrn of Highever's role in his overthrow. Yes. Frame it that way. You ordered Fergus north. The Teyrn of Highever, acting on orders from the

Crown, uncovered Howe's sinister schemes and brought him down. He has put to flight Howe's accomplices. He has rescued the survivors and has arranged for their safe return to Denerim. A tragedy, but not of our making!"

Cailan shook his head again. "It's all unbelievable." Loghain rolled his eyes.

"Unbelievable" was the first, general reaction, at least among the Fereldan nobles. Shouts of disbelief and disgust echoed from the stone walls of the closed meeting. Arls Wulffe and Bryland were outspoken in their denunciation. Other banns claimed long-time dislike and suspicion of the late Arl.

The dwarves listened rather impassively. None of it was their concern. Elves in the human cities were treated as dusters were in Orzammar. If the lords of Orzammar could have found a market that would pay good coin for the dusters, they would have rid themselves of them without hesitation. However, with Dalish allies, it was diplomatic to maintain a serious demeanor.

Loghain watched Merrill and her advisers for their reactions. Cailan was most worried about them, and Loghain could not help feeling a pang of shame and sorrow, when his old comrades from the Night Elves heard the news.

The anticipated explosion, however, did not come. Merrill looked immeasurably saddened, while Maynriel and Thanovir seemed revolted.

"How terrible!" cried the Keeper. "What a cruel fate! Can

nothing be done to save them?"

Loghain said, "Teyrn Fergus had no ships at his command to pursue the Tevinters. Many of their ships must have already reached Tevinter by now. He has done what he could to alleviate the sufferings of those left behind, and to send them home as quickly as possible."

Maynriel murmured to the Keeper, just loud enough to be heard. "This is what comes of elves sacrificing their independence and dignity. It is a sad thing for the innocent children, but their elders brought it on themselves."

Thanovir appeared to agree. "What kind of elf is so easily lured to his doom?"

Bronwyn, sitting among the senior officers, stirred at that, and fixed burning eyes on the elves. Loghain sat it and frowned at her, willing her to be silent. If the Dalish were not going to take it as a personal insult, he did not wish her to stir up hard feelings.

She finally said, "I can believe anything of the man who murdered my six-year-old nephew. There seems to have been no limit to his crimes. Is the Highever Alienage truly gone?"

"So it would seem," said Cailan, looking at her compassionately. "They were sold down to the last man, woman, and child, as far as anyone can tell. Howe wished to conceal his deeds."

"You don't think Bann Vaughan had a hand in this?" Wulffe asked bluntly. "He was in league with Howe to

some extent. Did he know about the slaving?"

The room broke into loud talk at that. Vaughan's hideous end and the ugly rumors about it were topics of never-ending interest. Bearded men gossiped eagerly, hoping for the worst and most exciting possibilities.

Cailan, properly primed by Loghain, was ready for this. He raised his voice, and the room stilled. "We do not. We believe he acted in good faith, when Howe offered work for the elves. There had been serious unemployment among the Denerim elves, which always leads to unrest. He merely thought this was an outlet for them that would earn them needed wages. He kept it secret because of the Crown's differences with the Arl of Amaranthine. There he did wrong."

Wulffe was not entirely satisfied. He turned to Bryland and remarked, "And what did Urien know about this? What did he know then, and what does he know now?"

Bryland shrugged. "Children don't always tell their parents everything. Sometimes they tell them nothing at all. Urien was here and I daresay Vaughan pocketed the money."

"Hmmp!"

The elves talked quietly among themselves. Loghain tried to read them, but found the fair faces inscrutable. They were not on their feet, denouncing the perfidy of all humans, which was something, he supposed.

Bronwyn, on the other hand, was horrified and distressed by the news. Her friends had guessed that there was something wrong about the elves leaving the city,



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but who could have foreseen such wickedness? Adaia, of course would be the most affected... but Tara was so excited about her new family... Zevran would be cynically unsurprised, she supposed, and the thought of that cut surprisingly deep. It was impossible not feel soiled by Howe's dirty dealings. How horrible for Fergus to discover this, and how much worse not to be able to bring the perpetrators to justice! She must write to him and learn more.

Danith would not take it well, either. She had thought the Alienage a horrible place – an unsafe place, too. It did not help Bronwyn's conscience to acknowledge that Danith was absolutely right. How could she blame her for wanting to save that child she fancied from greedy, high-handed humans?

Even those among us who mean well can do nothing to protect them... not really. If I were an elf, I'd want to wipe the human race from the face of Thedas!

Announcement and orders followed the shocking news. Bronwyn listened with half an ear, trying to find words to tell her own people that would not result in mayhem. Some would not take it well at all.

She was right. Her people did not take it well. She called them together immediately; for they must hear this news from her lips and not from some loud-mouthed ruffian.

Adaia's black eyes seemed to fill her face, and she fell utterly silent. Tara clutched at Adaia's shoulder, while her



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hand sought out Zevran's.

"They said that my family went north. Maybe your brother saved them?" she faltered.

"I don't know, Tara. I shall write Fergus directly. He has made arrangements to have those he rescued sent home. At this point, we don't know who in Denerim fell victim to Howe and his Tevinter associates. I do know that all the elves I knew from Highever – those who did not go to Ostagar with my brother's troops – all of them and all of their families were ruthlessly sold and shipped away. It is a terrible thing. We have not ships able to pursue the Tevinters, nor coin enough to tempt them to return."

To her relief, Danith said little, but to offer condolences and some words of hope to Tara and Adaia. Zevran said nothing at all, fulfilling Bronwyn's expectations that he would expect no better of the human race. He gave the girls a shoulder to cry on, and did not look in Bronwyn's direction.

The other companions were sympathetic, for the most part, or at least denounced the Tevinters. Sten, of course, did not hesitate to give his opinions of the archenemies of the Qunari.

"A corrupt and decadent people, on the brink of chaos. We of the Qun will continue our struggle against them. It is not impossible that some of the ships may be taken by Qunari, and your people given a place among us."

Bronwyn supposed he meant well, though Adaia and Tara were not much comforted by the idea of the kidnapped



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elves being prisoners of the Qunari instead of the Tevinters. Most people mumbled some kind words. Morrigan stood apart, either because she did not like to hear pitiful tales of oppressed people, or because she simply did not care.

Brosca laid a hand on Tara's arm. "Maybe they'll get away! Yeah... when the slavers are asleep, they'll toss them into the water and get away! That's what I'd do! I bet some of them get away."

Cullen shook his head, wanting to comfort Tara, but unable to lie about the prospects of the unlucky captives. They had been taken by the vilest of blood mages and no doubt had already been enthralled by their arts. Soon, if not already, they would be mindless slaves, bound by forbidden magics. They might be taken by Qunari, true... or by pirates... or by storms. None of those things were likely to result in living, freed elves.

"Arl Howe will prowl the Void for this," he muttered, for lack of anything better to say.

Morrigan sniffed in contempt. Anders nudged her, a little embarrassed, and whispered, "I'm so sorry," to Tara and Adaia.

Alistair saw it from a different perspective. "I'm glad Fergus was there to put an end to it. I always knew he'd take Howe down, but then to find out everything he was involved. It must have been a shock. I know he'll do everything he can to help the victims."

"Yes," Tara agreed, wiping her face. "Teyrn Fergus is a good



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man. Probably a lot of people wouldn't care about the elves left behind." A thought struck her. "We could write to Hahren Valendrian to find out who was lost and who came back."

"You mean *you* can write," Adaia croaked disconsolately. Since coming to Ostagar, she had learned to read a bit, but writing was a lot harder than it looked.

"That's a good idea," Bronwyn said to Tara, wishing somehow to ease the elves' distress and her own disturbing feelings of guilt. "I am writing to Fergus. If you have letters, write them, and we'll give them to Adam to deliver. He is going north to Denerim in a few days, and then will be joining my brother wherever he is. You could take a letter to the Alienage as well, could you not, Adam?"

"I'd be glad to," Hawke assured them all.

The meeting broke up, and Bronwyn sat down to write her letter to Fergus. Danith lingered, watching her. After awhile Bronwyn spoke.

"You were quite right to want to take that child back with you to the Dalish. I admit it freely."

A silence. Danith said, "Perhaps Zathrian's clan was not the proper place for her at that particular moment."

Bronwyn nodded. It was something that they had reached even this degree of accord. "When things are settled, I shall do my best to assist you in finding the child and securing her safe placement. Given what we have learned, we must assume that the child's mother is either dead or enslaved. The likelihood of her returning to claim



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her daughter is next to nothing."

"So I think," Danith agreed. "My clan will cherish her." She gave the commander a nod, and went to join the little knot of elves at the far end of the room.

Adaia thin shoulders were shaking. "Father's safe, Shianni's safe, the hahren's safe. We can get through this. Father's safe..."

Tara whispered, "You can't tell me that *somebody* didn't know about this! Didn't people see wagonloads of elves moving north? Didn't people see elves being forced onto the ships? If hundreds of elves were going to the city of Amaranthine, didn't people wonder why the city wasn't full of them?"

"My dear," Zevran said, arm comfortingly around her waist, "you know they did not. People do not see such things, because they do not matter to them. There were no doubt low-level lackeys at the docks... wagon drivers... guardsmen... Yes. Some knew, but were paid not to talk, and the lost were only elves, after all. It is something, I think, that this is being treated as a great crime. It would be far more painful, would it not, if this news were greeted by yawns?"

"That is true," Danith agreed unexpectedly. "The humans here acknowledge that it was wrong and evil. That is indeed something."

"It doesn't bring my family back," Tara said softly. "How funny... *My family*. I only knew about them a few days, but it meant so much to me. I was looking forward to meeting them again, hoping they'd be proud of me... Now – there's



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nothing. They've been swallowed by the Tevinter Imperium."

"We should go after them," Adaia hissed. "We should go after them and *get them back!*"

"Little one," soothed Zevran, "Tevinter is far away across the sea. You would need a ship, and warriors brave enough to face the Tevinters magisters. Even Andraste needed her husband General Maferath and a great army to defeat them!"

"I don't care," Adaia said, her voice cracking. "I'm going to save up my loot, and I'm going to get a ship, and I'll go to Tevinter someday, and I'll buy back our people, and if the Tevinters won't sell, I'll *steal* them back! We can't wait for anybody to do it for us. We have to do it for ourselves!"

Zevran considered this, amused, and then shrugged. "It is true that such a quest would require fewer numbers than Andraste's host."

"We're supposed to fight the Blight," Tara pointed out, already picturing a long, long... *long* journey. She had new abilities now: she knew things that would give slaveholding Tevinter magisters quite a surprise, for a few seconds before she killed them.

"Oh, we'll fight the Blight. We have to," agreed Adaia, lowering her voice again. "But when it's over, and we have a safe place here at home, we'll go get everybody. Does that sound all right?"

"I'll go with you," Tara said instantly.

"And I," Danith spoke up. "Many will come. We will be clever and cautious, and wrest our cousins from the

humans. When the Tevinters first moved against Arlathan, our people retreated, unable to conceive of such malice – unable to resist it. By the time we understood that they meant to destroy and enslave us, it was already too late. We shall not make that mistake again.” Her eyes turned to Zevran.

The handsome Antivan laughed. “It may be that when the Blight is over, our noble commander will release me from my service to her. If that day comes, then how could I resist such an adventure?”

“— and promise the elves, in my name, remission of this year’s taxes,” Loghain wrote to his steward.

The last thing they needed at the moment was for the city elves to riot. Loghain told his man in Gwaren of Howe’s dealings with the Tevinters. It was important to spread the news that everyone else repudiated slavery, and that the surviving Alienage elves were in no danger from such a scheme. Gwaren’s Alienage was not as large as Denerim’s, but it was sizable enough to cause real trouble if the elves rioted. Remitting the elves’ taxes for the year would not cut much into the teyrnir’s revenues, but it would mean a great deal to the elves themselves.

The other matter at hand was seeing that his daughter had the best Healer possible. He was about to send for Wynne, when his thoughts were interrupted.

“My lord,” his manservant bowed. “The Arl of South

Reach wishes to speak to you in private.”

“Send him in.”

What did Bryland want now? The man had been looking distressed since the death of Bann Vaughan, his daughter’s betrothed. Lady Habren was a tiresome girl, and Loghain would well imagine that Bryland would like be rid of her, but one never knew about people’s families...

“Loghain.”

“Sit, Leonas. Some wine?”

“Definitely.”

They drank together in silence a moment, and then Bryland came out with what was troubling him.

“Loghain, you’re the father of a daughter. *You’ll* understand me when I say how very difficult that is.”

Loghain grunted. He and Anora had certainly had their moments. There had been that grueling time, when she was fifteen... “Lady Habren has not come to terms with the death of her fiance? I gather it was a blow to her.”

“Oh, yes, yes... Maker, yes! She was... *fond* of Vaughan. Wrote to me that he understood her. Said he was a ‘kindred spirit,’ whatever that means. She *wanted* to be married to him. I don’t think she’s ever been denied something she really wanted before.” Bryland wiped his mouth hastily and blundered on. “I’ve never understood her, but I’ve tried to give her a good life. The more I saw of Vaughan – you know how it is on campaign – you find out things about people that you’d never know otherwise... At any rate, the

more I saw of him, the more I detested him. And then, that sordid end, drunk in the hills, up to Maker knows what... well, between us, I was relieved that the man was not going to be the father of my daughter's children!"

"Umm..." Loghain said noncommittally, not wishing to say anything to the man about Bann Vaughan that could be quoted someday.

"Well, then, you understand," Brland went on, leaving Loghain wondering how the arl had construed that from "Umm..."

Bryland pulled a letter from his doublet. "I've just had the most extraordinary proposal for Habren. I suppose I should have foreseen it really, with her wanting a husband, and..." He paused, and then said, "To put it plainly, Loghain, Urien no longer has an heir, nor Habren a betrothed. Urien has asked me to accept him as Habren's bridegroom in his deceased son's place."

Loghain blinked, then rearranged his thoughts. "Habren marry Urien? That's... er... well... What do you think your daughter will say? Does she know of Urien's intentions?"

"Maker's Breath! Yes, she does. She enclosed one of her 'Please, Pappa, I must have this!' letters with Urien's. Of course it's all dead easy to arrange. The dowry, the settlement, the terms for the heirs: it's just like it was with Vaughan, only Habren will be Arlessa of Denerim right away. She seems pretty keen on that."

"Well," Loghain said slowly, "if he wants it, and she wants it,

and the paperwork is all in order, why not go ahead with it? You must have wanted the alliance with the Denerim arling to arrange the match with Vaughan in the first place."

"Yes... of course. Still, Habren's very young, and a girl like that really doesn't understand what marriage *means*, don't you know?" He added, red with embarrassment, "Not that there's anything wrong with a bit of an age difference!"

Loghain realized that the Arl was referring to Bronwyn and himself, which was intolerable and absolutely none of Bryland's business. He glared, but the Arl did not seem to take the hint. "What," he ventured coolly, "exactly is your problem with such a match? Do you think Urien would be unkind to her?"

"No... not that. I don't think he would want to make an enemy of me. I've known him for years, and he's a far better man than Vaughan turned out to be. It's just that he's hardly some young girl's romantic dream."

"Perhaps Habren has other dreams."

Bryland sighed. "There is that. She really is keen on being an Arlessa."

"Then there you are."

Bronwyn came in later, to talk things over, and for other things...

Clearly, last night was not enough for her. It was a pity everything had to be so quick and rushed and surreptitious, but he did his best to make it sweet.

Afterwards, they had to dress quickly, for there was only so long that the manservant could keep out visitors, and there was no way to stop Cailan, if he took it into his head to drop in for a chat. Loghain called in his trusted manservant, and gave orders to bring the Healer Wynne to him, as soon as possible. He sat down at his writing table, sifting through the papers. Bronwyn perched on the table, impudently reading the dispatches over his shoulder, munching an apple.

She was constantly hungry, poor girl. He saw to it there was always something in his chambers for her.

"How did your people take the news?" he asked.

"Not very well. Luckily, Adaia's immediate family is safe. She saw them in Denerim, and they had been outspoken against the work crews. I daresay everyone will remember that they, as well as the Alienage headman, were proved right. Tara... well, she doesn't remember her family, but is understandably sad at their fate. They went north some months ago, and I daresay they have already been put on the auction block in the Minrathous city market. I thought Danith would be angrier, but she did not stand up and denounce me. She is no fool, and realizes, no doubt, that it would do no good. The Blight still needs to be addressed, before other quarrels can be pursued."

"No resignations, then? No desertions?"

"None, thank the Maker!"

He sat back and smirked at her, running his hand over

her thigh. "Well, I have some news for you! Arl Bryland confided in me that Urien Arl of Denerim has petitioned him for the hand of Habren his daughter!"

"Habren... and Arl Urien?" Bronwyn cried, utterly stunned.

"Arl Urien and the soon-to-be Arlessa Habren, yes," Loghain assured her. "Her father was here, expressing some concern at the match."

"I daresay. Poor man."

"You are concerned for your cousin?"

"Cousin Leonas?" Bronwyn laughed. "No, I meant Arl Urien! He doesn't know what he's getting into!"

Loghain shook his head. "I'm not in the least alarmed for Urien. He is quite capable of dealing with a spoiled child."

"He didn't deal particularly well with his own!" Bronwyn observed tartly.

"Habren will not be his child, but his wife," Loghain pointed out. "Urien's past history... well, Arlessa Liadan did not have an easy life with him, but she died when you were a child, of course. He was also not very easy on his daughter, who as you must know died in childbirth, along with her son. Vaughan was his pride, and he treated him very differently than he treated the women in his family."

"So the wedding is going ahead, only with a different bridegroom."

"Yes. Urien feels there nothing to gain by delay. Bryland will take a brief leave at the beginning of next month, and see his daughter wed at the Cathedral."

"A pity I shall miss it," Bronwyn said primly, struggling not to grin. "For I feel certain I shall have a prior committment."

Wynne was shown in, her mild face rather puzzled. Loghain ordered the door shut. He had considered how much information to entrust to this mage, and had decided to tell her as little as possible. She seemed a decent woman, but the matter was simply too important to be careless. Nonetheless, he would have to tell her *something*.

"The Warden-Commander here tells me that you have a document signed by the Knight-Commander, permitting you independent travel."

"Yes, my lord," said Wynne. "I am honored to have his full confidence."

"You have mine as well," said Bronwyn. "It's important that you realize that what we are going to say to you is a matter only for the three of us."

Her curiosity ablaze, Wynne looked at both of them in turn. "Of course."

"I wish you to go to Denerim," Loghain declared, without further preamble. "The Queen has need of your services."

Wynne's kind, middle-aged face lit with joy. "The Queen is with child?"

"No," Loghain replied, dashing the woman's hopes. "She is unwell, but that cannot be a matter of gossip. We need not only the best Healer available, but a woman of known discretion. Do not speak to anyone of this. News of the Queen's ill health could be used to harm her."

Wynne's eyes flashed, as she drew herself up proudly. "No one will ever know because of me! What is wrong with Her Majesty?"

Loghain grimaced. Bronwyn said, "Perhaps it is best that you make an independent assessment, without being prejudiced by my own observations. However, she was ill enough when I saw her in Denerim, that I was forced to leave Warden Jowan behind to give her regular treatments —"

"Jowan!" Wynne stared at her in horror. "Jowan is a *blood mage*! How could you —"

Bronwyn refused to take offence. "He was the only mage available with any kind of Healing skills, and as a Warden, I could trust in his silence. He felt himself that it was a matter for your expertise, but he agreed to stay until you or someone of equal ability could be sent to relieve him."

"I shall go at once!"

Loghain said, "The day after tomorrow a wagon train will head north. Perhaps it would be best if you traveled with them. I shall give you orders, stamped with my seal, so the curious may know you are on official business. Say nothing to anyone until you are actually leaving, and then say only that you are being sent to train Wardens in Healing skills."

Bronwyn bit her lip, thinking. "I believe you've met Adam Hawke, Warden Carver's brother? He will be traveling at the same time. I shall ask him to be your escort."

Wynne's face was deceptively innocent. "I shall see that no harm comes to him, Commander."

Loghain started, gave the woman a hard look, and then snorted with amusement. Bronwyn laughed. "All the better for the letters he carries to reach their destination!"

Most of the Wardens were awake at first light. The noise level in the Tower of Ishal awakened anyone who had not the power to cast a silencing charm. Bronwyn rubbed her eyes, wondering why it was so dark.

That's right. The Dalish scouts are moving out at dawn. I remember hearing about that last night. Why is it so noisy here in the Tower?

She sat up, wishing she had rebraided her hair before sleeping. Leliana was up already, splashing her face in the wash water. She looked over at Bronwyn and smiled mischievously. Bronwyn hoped she was going to have another conversation about her own personal life.

Lelilana had plenty to say, but not about Bronwyn.

"You missed the romantic scene last night," Leliana whispered excitedly, "When Tara took Zevran by the hand and led him to her... er... private corner."

Ah, yes, the screen of blankets that gave Tara the same sort of privacy that Morrigan and Anders enjoyed in the corner opposite. So, Tara and Zevran were together, openly and more or less officially. They had been flirting... and Bronwyn suspected rather more than that... but in private.

"As long as it doesn't cause any trouble, I wish them well," Bronwyn said, fumbling for her comb. "And as long as I

don't have to listen to them."

Adaia's croaking voice spoke up from the other side of Danith's cot. "I think it's *nice*."

Danith stretched, and groped for her shirt, "Your Hahren Valendrian will be disappointed. I think he wanted to marry Zevran off to one of the maidens of the Alienage."

"Well," Adaia said, after she had processed that thought for a little while. "Tara is sort of like 'a maiden of the Alienage.' She's an elf, and she was born there, so it sort of comes to the same thing."

"Except for the not actually being *married* part," Brosca pointed out, scratching her bottom. "Aren't you getting up, Astrid?"

"I am not going on patrol with the elves today," the dwarven princess said calmly. Her eyes were still shut, giving the impression that she was still asleep. She was not, but was very comfortable in her cot at the moment.

"But Danith is," Bronwyn said, "so I will get up and share a good breakfast with her."

Anders' head popped out from the corner he shared with Morrigan, eyes squeezed shut. He asked plaintively, "Can I come out? Is everybody decent?"

"No! We're not at all decent," laughed Leliana. "When has that ever stopped you?"

Loghain was awake at first light himself. Half-dressed and in the midst of shaving, he glanced out the window to see a tall figure towering over his elven friends, pretty

Keeper Merrill at his side.

"Maker's Breath!"

Cailan was out of control. Completely out of control. Loghain threw down his razor and wiped the soap from his face. Shrugging on a linen shirt, he hurried down the steps, hoping to talk some sense into the fool. Cailan, his golden armor and golden hair catching the first shafts of sunlight, turned to see his fuming father-in-law emerge from the arched doorway.

"Good day to you, Loghain!" the king called out cheerily. With a sly grin, he added, "I'm surprised to see you risen from your bed so early."

"Do you plan to travel with the Dalish today?" Loghain asked coldly, ignoring the jibe.

"In the spirit of cooperation," Cailan assured him, turning his smile to Merrill. "In the spirit of solidarity. The mission is straightforward enough, after all."

That was true: a large party of elves was to sweep the narrow valley to the southeast for darkspawn stragglers. Then they were to lay a carefully designed web of traps, and look for any signs of tunneling.

Some Grey Wardens were going, of course. The Dalish Warden Danith and the boy, Carver Hawke, came out to join the elves. The boy's irritatingly good-looking brother seemed to be going as well. If the fellow wished to travel along and boast later of his acquaintance with the King of Ferelden, he was welcome to do so, since it would take him

away from Bronwyn. Loghain distrusted the newcomer. He always distrusted men with too-bright smiles, and he knew a fortune-hunter when he saw one. The sooner he saw the back of this one, the better.

Tomorrow, thank the Maker...

Cailan was surrounded by some of his usual honor guard, though only a half-dozen of them. A few dwarven apprentice engineers were rounding out the party, laden with equipment. Seeing Loghain's unease, the king took him aside and spoke with quiet confidence.

"After our news yesterday, this seems like the best possible way to assure our allies of our good faith. If the King of Ferelden himself entrusts himself to Dalish archers, it proves our respect better than any words could. I'm going, Loghain. You can't stop me."

"No," Loghain replied, his face hardening. "I cannot. Try not to die."

In spite of all he had done, in spite of his selfish treachery, in spite of his infidelity to Anora, Cailan was still the boy he had helped raise, the child of his closest friend. If there was any way to put everything right that would leave Cailan alive, well, and King, Loghain was willing to go with it.

Cailan patted Loghain on the shoulder, grinning. "I'm not going to die today, I *promise*."

While the tall men talked, Danith scowled at Merrill, and jerked her head in the direction of the smiling Cailan.

"You spend much time with the shemlen king."



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"Yes, I do," Merrill admitted frankly. "I think he's very sweet. A little dim, but very sweet." She lowered her voice, huge eyes wide. "What would you say, *lethallan*, if I told you he's planning a land grant for the elvhen? He is. Really. A place of our own again, here in the south. So many of the humans have fled that there will be open land for us! He will declare the grant tonight!"

"The Chasind –"

"Word is that they have been decimated by the dark-spawn. If the land is uninhabited, humans will rush to claim it. Why should the People not have it instead?"

Her head spinning with the sudden possibility, Danith caught Merrill by the arm, eager to hear more. "Where? Has he fixed on a place? How wide a territory?"

"He has not fixed the grant in his mind yet. He is still mulling over the scheme, but I would do anything to make it happen."

Danith paused. How could she disagree? To have a place of their own...

Even were much of it in the cold and inhospitable south, it would be a blessing beyond compare. Even they were to found... well, not a city, but even a village of their own, it would be a home to which they could welcome their lost kin of the foul Alienages. Danith considered it more. A pity they were not being offered the land surrounding the great temple. That was a wonder. and should be known to all the elvhen. Perhaps it would be possible to build a per-



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manent structure and move some of the artifacts to their new home. Or perhaps they should just keep the temple a secret place of pilgrimage. Bronwyn was feeling unhappy and guilty about the fate of the city dwellers who had been tricked and sold. It would not be difficult, surely, to persuade her not to divulge the location.

"You are right," she finally said. "To have a homeland once more, I would do anything necessary, too."

Bronwyn was lingering over another helping of porridge with her remaining Wardens, when Loghain stalked in.

"Don't get up," he snorted, waving the more courteous of the companions – Cullen, Alistair, Leliana – down. He motioned Bronwyn over to the windows, well away from the table, to speak to him. Then, he thought again, and summoned Alistair as well. Scout trotted over to see him. Loghain rubbed the dog's ears absently.

Very softly, he said, "Send that mage of yours out to the southeast to keep an eye on the Dalish party. Cailan's decided to go out with them."

Briefly puzzled, Bronwyn stared at Loghain. "You mean Morrigan? In bird form?"

Alistair whispered, "He means Anders!"

This was news to her. "Anders is a shape-changer, too?" Bronwyn whispered back.

Loghain rolled his eyes. while Alistair explained.

"Yes! It all came out when we went scouting. He can take

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the shape of a raven. It's dead useful for scouting and he's less sulky about doing it than Morrigan." Alistair's mouth twisted at the witch's name. "He can fly high enough that he's not in danger from either the darkspawn arches or spellcasters."

Loghain said, "It's how we've been able to map out the openings in the earth east of here. We've found an Archdemon-sized one, but there are more, too. Anders has made himself useful. Send him out. Cailan feels he owes it to the elves to show what he calls 'good faith.' In his current mood, he's likely to do something remarkably stupid if they come across the darkspawn." His eyes found Anders, sitting next to Morrigan on the other side of the table. The mage grimaced comically when he realized that he was the subject of the conversation.

"See to it," Loghain ordered. "By the way, you should encourage your other mages to learn the skill. I'll be inspecting the White River Militia if Anders has anything to report." Loghain was up and out of the room, before Bronwyn could formulate a reply.

Alistair said, "Actually, it was really interesting to go scouting with Teyrn Loghain. I learned a lot. We got another look at the old Warden outpost. Loghain thinks the outpost could be rebuilt. What do you think? Wouldn't it be great to have a place of our own?"

Bronwyn could see the advantages in it. "It would be a better place for Joinings, certainly. Far more private." She raised her voice enough to be heard at the table. "Anders!

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we need to speak with you, if you please!"

In the end, Morrigan went with Anders, a little to Bronwyn's annoyance. Teaching Tara to be a shape-shifter sounded like a very good plan. Without Morrigan here, there was no reason not to let Tara and Zevran go off to visit the Dalish camp. Adaia was going, too. Bronwyn could not fault the elves for wanting to talk the situation out amongst themselves, but she did not want an elven clique forming within the Wardens.

Cullen was looking very depressed. Bronwyn suspected it had something to do with Tara, and she wondered if she should have a private talk with him. Brozca was sitting with him. Bronwyn could not make out the words, but the tones were determinedly cheerful and encouraging.

"We're going to the practice yard, Boss!" Brozca called out. "Everybody else already went down there. I bet Astrid wins!"

"Very likely," agreed Bronwyn.

"You coming?"

"In a bit."

She made some notes to herself, thinking about recruiting. The Fereldan Wardens now numbered eleven. Duncan had had twenty-five under his command by the end. Eleven was not enough, not even with Scout... not even with their five auxiliaries. Five, not six, since Adam Hawke would be on his way north tomorrow. Oghren was still waffling about becoming a Warden, and as for Adaia... the girl was willing enough, but Bronwyn doubted she had the skill to



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survive long enough to collect a vial of darkspawn blood.

She needed more Wardens, but was reluctant to pilfer from the army to do it. Well, she might very well have to pilfer, but she would prefer not to *conscript* anyone. It would not do any harm to make the rounds of the camp and talk to people. There must be soldiers here who felt their current situation did not allow them to achieve their full potential. There must be discontented young squires who dreamed of glory. If only they could survive the Joining!

Maybe some more Templars. Cullen had worked out well. She never saw him take lyrium anymore. That didn't mean he wasn't using, but at least he seemed to have the habit under control. Templars were trained warriors, and it seemed to Bronwyn they could be doing a great deal more to help against the Blight. Perhaps not the Templars *here*, because it would make trouble for the mages, but there had been some decent men in Lothering...

There were thousands of warriors right here in Ostagar. Maybe she should have gone with Loghain on his inspection. Or maybe not. People were already talking about them quite enough.



"Come on," Broasca tried to urge Cullen from the bench in the practice yard. "Let's go beat on each other. It'll make you feel a lot better."

"I'm *fine*," Cullen muttered.

"No, you're not. You're all brooding and gloomy. I'll let



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you have the first hit free. Come on, it'll be fun!"

Sten and Alistair were squaring off against each other. The wooden practice greatsword struck Alistair's shield with a resounding "BANG!" It barely jolted Alistair, who had learned how to absorb heavy blows and come out swinging before the follow-through was done. His longsword rapped the Qunari smartly across the side of his left knee.

"Well done, Alistair!" Astrid called.

Cullen did not appear to be seeing the bout. "Tara went off to the elves, didn't she?"

Astrid sat down on his other side, and caught Broasca's eye. "Yes, she is visiting the elves. She said something about talking to some of the elven mages."

"She went with *Zevran*," Cullen muttered. "And Zevran didn't sleep in our quarters last night."

"Cullen," Astrid said, very directly. "They're an item. Really. You're going to have to get over it. Tara doesn't find human men attractive. She finds you frightening. Your height and bearing recall unpleasant experiences. And with the slavery scandal..."

"— But I'm not like that!" Cullen protested, his face drawn in pain.

"Nobody says you are," Broasca said, trying to get him to look at her. "I think you're a great guy! I don't mind being loomed over. Tara does, though."

"In the Circle," he muttered, "it didn't matter if a mage was human or elf."



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Astrid took a deep breath, bit back the first thing on her mind, and then said, "No, it didn't matter. They were all prisoners. If there's anything I've learned, it's that a prison looks very different to the prisoners than it does to the guards."

"That is so true!" Brosca agreed.

"The Circle isn't..."

Brosca clicked her tongue, annoyed. "Come on, Cullen. Get real. She hadn't been allowed outside since she was four years old! It was a place where any minute she could be killed, or be turned into some sort of mindless human golem. And she *was* locked up and raped. By great big human guys. She's never going to want to do anything like that again. She's your friend. I think you'll have to settle for that."

"But Zevran's an *assassin!*"

"Yes, but he's *our* assassin!" Brosca shot back.

Alistair won his bout, and discarded his splintered practice sword. Astrid gave him a warm smile, and he grinned back.

"Oghren, you're up next!"

Hearing the raised voices, Leliana came over to join the gossip session. "You are talking about Zevran and Tara, yes?" she whispered. "They are such a charming couple... both so attractive." She looked at Cullen sympathetically. "She has made her choice. Her *friends* must support her."

Oghren walked by to join Alistair, swigging from his flask. He wagged his heavy brows at Cullen.

"Women, eh?"



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The expedition was going quite well. Cailan found it pleasant to be out with his new Dalish friends, and not be cooped up behind stone walls. The rain from two nights before had soaked well into the ground. The clouds had swept away to the northeast, leaving the sky a clear and radiant blue. It was just cool enough to make marching in armor not such a dismally sweaty business. And he had a pretty girl – no, two pretty girls to keep him company.

A shout echoed over the low voices of the Dalish.

"Let me through!"

Cailan heard it, and recognized the man's voice. The Grey Warden Anders, their Healer, was pushing past the elves, his face tense and alarmed. Cailan was faintly surprised to see him. Had he followed them from Ostagar?

"Let me through! Message for the King!"

"The King's here!" Cailan called cheerfully. "Is Loghain sending me another scolding?"

After what he glimpsed from the skies, Anders' sense of humor was hiding in a cellar for the duration.

"The darkspawn are on the move!" Anders reported. "They burst out of a new tunnel – over three hundred of them! They're coming up the south branch of the valley with a band of really big genlocks in front. The genlocks are carrying heavy shields. You wouldn't see them until they hit you from the right!"

"How far away are they?" Maynriel asked urgently,

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before Cailan could get a world in.

"Not more than a mile," Anders said, "and they're moving fast."

"Right," said Cailan. "Lucky that we know they're on their way. We can meet them on more than equal terms."

"Cailan," Merrill said softly, "It would be best for the hunters to shoot from cover..."

"— and we should send word to Loghain," Thanovir added.

"It's been done," Anders assured him quickly. "I was scouting with Morrigan. She's gone straight to Ostagar to report."

"Well then," Cailan said, sweeping the landscape for a good vantage. Pity they had not had a chance to lay the traps. They could still leave some of them behind to trip up the creatures...

"There!" he said. "That hill! It's got some natural terraces. Archers up there and take your positions!"

Maynriel glanced at Thanovir, somewhat relieved. Not a bad choice of ground. A flat-topped hill, not as tall as some of its neighbors, but with a steep slope and some good cover. Perhaps the young shemlen was not a total loss. Quickly, they hurried the archers back and up. Faintly, in the distance, they could hear a low squawking rumble. Would they be able to get into position in time?

Anders saw Danith and gave her a yell. "Get up there with the Dalish! Where's Carver?"

"Here!"

"Stay with the King! I'm going to buy you some time!"

"Who says it has to be you?" Carver shouted, red-faced.

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"Date of Joining!" Anders shouted back. "I know what I'm doing!"

Man distorted into bird: shrinking, blackening. shining feathers sprouting. Before the astonished King and the delighted Dalish, a raven took flight and sped off to the south.

"My, that was pretty!" Merrill declared. "If we live through this, I want to learn to do that!"



GREY WARDEN MAGE, ANDERS



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CHAPTER 22



KING'S MOUNTAIN

THE HAWK FLEW, CREELING, THROUGH THE WINDOW EMBRASURE AND PECKED AT BRONWYN.

"Morrigan?"

A quick, disturbing transformation. Morrigan was raging, yellow eyes afire.

"The King of Fools is under attack. And now my personal fool has stayed behind to defend him!"

Bronwyn had heard Morrigan on the subject of Cailan often enough to translate this instantaneously. It was possible that the beautiful witch's vanity had been piqued by the King's abrupt transfer of his admiration to Keeper Merrill.

"Where?"

"To the southeast, not five leagues. The darkspawn have come out of the hills in yet another place. It is a large force — over three hundred. Some of the genlocks appear unusually powerful. We must go!"

"Right!" Bronwyn pushed her notes aside, and slung on her weapons as the two women ran down the twisting staircases.



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"You!" she shouted at a guard on duty. "Go to the training ground and alert the Wardens. We'll meet them across the bridge. I'm off to report to the Teyrn. Tell them we're moving out — and fast!"

Morrigan was all but wringing her hands. Ghostly feathers manifested and vanished as she tried to control her flight reflex. Bronwyn said, "Go on! Find Teyrn Loghain and give her your report. Tell him the Wardens are going to support the King. We'll be across the bridge as soon as possible, to hear what the plan is."

She was briefly buffeted by the forming wings. Morrigan was off, arrowing south across Ostagar Gorge, her high-pitched cries fading into the distance. Bronwyn trotted behind, not wanting to exhaust herself in a sprint before it was absolutely necessary.

Soldiers waved at her as she jogged across the long stone bridge.

" — Good day to you, Girl Warden!"

Bronwyn waved back, smile fixed in place, keeping her pace steady to avoid raising unnecessary alarm. She needed to send someone down to the Dalish camp, and find her people there.

Andraste's nightgown! There was the Revered Mother, looking as if she wanted to talk to her. Bronwyn sketched a hasty bow, and jogged on, trying to look much too busy to talk at the moment.

"Bronwyn!"



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It was Cousin Leonas, and she slowed a little, and veered over to him. She kept her voice to a low, urgent whisper.

"I've got to get to Loghain! A scout reported that the King's party is under attack."

He did not try to stop her, but fell into step, instantly concerned. His officers looked at each other, and followed them, a flying wedge that everything else on the bridge stepped aside for.

"There were over a hundred Dalish with him! How many of the enemy?"

"Maybe three hundred."

"Maker's Breath!"

There was just the ramp now before they were on the other side and into the upper parade ground. The southern camp was a hive of activity. Loghain must already be acting on Morrigan's report. Soldiers were running up to join their fellows. Shouts and orders echoed off the ancient stones.

Thank the Maker! There were her elves, hurrying up from the valley. Zevran's grin was gleeful and bloodthirsty. Tara looked ready for anything. Little Adaia was running to her workshop, probably to bring them some supplies. Good thinking. Some of that improved deathroot poison was just the thing...

"Loghain!" Bryland called out. "We must go to the King's aid!"

Loghain, already surrounded by his officers, was in a curiously heightened state of calm: it was the controlled, powerful calm before the storm of battle.



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"We shall, of course, but we shall do so sensibly. Cauthrien, take the first company of Maric's Shield, and move out along the Hill Trail..."

He had formed a plan, and was already putting it into action. Bronwyn felt intense relief that there was someone here who was never at a loss. As he laid out his strategy, more and more eager warriors were joining them. A shout, and Bronwyn glanced over to see Alistair coming toward them at a run, with the rest of the Wardens.

"Where is Morrigan?" Bronwyn asked Loghain quietly.

"Gone," he shrugged. "She gave her report, glared at me with burning impatience, and then flew away. Enough of her. She has played her part. It is more important that you remember that you cannot take all your Wardens with you today."

She did. It was an unpleasant choice. If disaster befell them in the hills, who could be trusted to carry on the mission? Theoretically, she should choose her Second, Alistair, but she knew he would never forgive her if she forbade him to go to his brother. And if the Wardens were to need a leader...

Pulling her people aside, she said, "We're going to the King's aid, but not all of us. Two of us must stay here. The Wardens were almost annihilated at the battle in Bloomington. We cannot risk that again." An anxious, unhappy pause. "Astrid, I want you to remain here with Leliana. I know, I know. But we're *it*. We have to keep *someone* in reserve. No other Warden in all of Thedas has come to stand with us. If things go wrong, someone has to do seri-



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ous recruiting! Maker guide you."

"No!" Leliana cried. "Bronwyn! Wait!"

But Bronwyn was already turning away, not liking the look of grim understanding on Astrid's face any better than the one of pained disappointment on Leliana's.

In fact, Astrid had grasped the very great compliment her Commander had just paid her. It was she, rather than Alistair, that Bronwyn trusted to rebuild the Wardens and slay the Archdemon if today's battle went wrong. Reflexively, she began making plans, including a mental list of warriors she had seen who would be likely recruits. And of course, they would still have a mage: Jowan, up north in Denerim...

She glanced after her comrades, heading off to join the departing troops. Alistair gave her a wry, sympathetic grin, which she answered with a wave and smile.

"I can't believe it," Leliana mourned. "How could she leave me behind? *Us* behind?"

"She *trusts* us, Leliana," Astrid said, laying a hand on the bard's arm. "She trusts us to know what to do. She trusts us to know her mind, and not fail her."

"And we won't, but — what is *she* doing?"

Adaia was running from her workshop, belts laden with bombs and poison flasks criss-crossing her thin chest.

"What is he doing?" Cailan wondered, shading his eyes with his hand. Anders-turned-raven was only a dot now, dropping down behind a distant ridge. A hideous clamor



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rose up, drifting on the wind.

"Providing a diversion, Your Majesty," Carver called back.

"Oh. Well done."

Blood called to blood. Blood burned in them relentlessly, drawing them on with every heartbeat. The dark-spawn spewed from the hole in the earth, howling. Even the bright yellow torture of daylight was no hindrance to their thundering advance. The strong trampled the weak: the genlocks in front smashed obstacles in their path with their shields. Stones were splintered and ground to powder under hundreds of iron-shod boots.

The Hurlock Vanguard who led them suddenly halted, causing chaos behind him. Shrieks of rage and agony rose above the crash of iron and broken bones. Off to their right, not a hundred feet away, was one of the Tainted Ones; the enemies of their blood. He did not challenge them with drawn sword, or shout defiance. This Warden... waved.

"Cooo-eee!" Anders called cheerfully. "Over here, you scabrous pustules on the arse of Thedas! Fight me! You know you want to!"

The Hurlock bellowed unintelligibly, and lifted a crude, massive sword in command. Instantly, the flailing mob had purpose once more. Diverted from their original objective, they shrieked and gobbled, charging at the lone figure in their path. Their rush built up momentum: the genlocks bellowed and thrust forward with their iron



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shields, scraping the earth flat.

Anders raised his staff, and summoned the lightning.



Seconds later, the remaining darkspawn crashed to a halt. In a flash of black wings, the Warden was gone. Shocked, drained, and weakened, baffled darkspawn pounded after him, piling into the blind valley. The charge slowed to useless, milling fury, as genlock tore at hurlock, trying to find a way out of the cul de sac. At the back of the horde, a few of the darkspawn peeled away, heading toward the blood beacon farther on: the one they had first felt.

"I'm here!" High above them on a rocky ledge, Anders jeered at them. "Yeah! Over here!"

A flurry of arrows responded. Some of the darkspawn archers had a little longer range than Anders had predicted.

"Shit!" he snarled, pressing himself flat into the rocks, scraping his knuckles bloody. More arrows clattered around him. One ricocheted, and the arrowhead slashed a long ragged tear in his robes. "Not good!"

A few of the genlocks climbed up their fellows like ladders, scrabbling on the sheer stone face. More and more piled on them, lured irresistibly by the shared Taint.

But still more turned back down the wider valley, feeling the call of others of the hated kind. Once those were in motion, others mindlessly followed, excited by the chase.

Anders edged under an outcropping, and gathered himself for another blast of energy. Anything he could do



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to chip away at the darkspawn could mean life or death for King Cailan and those with him.

White-hot bolts of energy crackled from his fingers, shaking the ground. A crazy pyramid of darkspawn overbalanced and toppled back into the seething mass of monsters. Anders grinned wolfishly, and hoped no one had brought an ogre to the party.



The elves had withdrawn in good order, and climbed the steep slope with their usual agility. Humans and dwarves found it considerably harder going. The King's personal guard hovered anxiously, wanting their charge up on the heights and out of the greatest danger.

"Your Majesty! Take my hand, ser!" cried Ser Elric Maraigne.

"Thanks, Elric." Cailan laughed gamely and struggled up, bracing his left foot on an exposed root. "Plate armor is not exactly the proper apparel for rock climbing! —"

"Too true, alas, Cailan," agreed Ser Landry. He wiped his face, his eyes burning from the salty sweat. "But we'll be glad of it if the creatures climb up after us!"

Above them, an elf cried out, "Mythal preserve us! I see them! They are coming!"

More calmly, Thanovir declared, "Fewer than we thought. The mage's distraction worked well."

Merrill was by no means the only mage in the Dalish forces. There were four others among them today, all of them younger even than Merrill, and they met with their

Keeper, speaking softly among themselves, discussing what would work best against the horde racing toward them. Their range was no better than the archers: for many spells, not nearly as good. There were some wide-area spells, however, that would wreak havoc. They were not much used among the Dalish, but today was the day for them. The mages spread out, up and down the line, to give as much support as possible to the hunters. Merrill stood at Cailan's side.

The Hawke brothers, more lightly armored than Cailan's knights, were already on the summit and taking positions by the ranks of Dalish archers. Carver was cursing himself for not bringing his bow. A curious sensation scratched at his senses.

He shaded his eyes. "Elves have better eyes than I do. Do you see them, Adam?"

"I see a lot of dust. Look here, Carver," he lowered his voice. "You told me that the Wardens can sense darkspawn."

Carver whispered back, "We can. We do. I feel them in the distance. A lot of darkspawn, but it's kind of vague."

"Well, then, does that mean that the darkspawn can sense you?"

The boy gaped, unsure how to answer.

Adam pressed him, "— because if they do, maybe it's not a good idea for the Wardens to bunch up around the King."

"We can't go off and leave him!"

"Of course not. I'm just saying that maybe you and

Danith shouldn't stand right next to him and attract unwanted attention his way."

Danith drew closer, hearing her name. "What are you saying about me?"

Carver leaned down to speak in her ear. "Darkspawn are attracted to us. Maybe we shouldn't stay really close to the King. It might make them target him."

Danith cared little for the shemlen king personally, but Merrill had great hopes of him. "Very well. I shall make my stand further down, with Maynriel's hunters. You may come with me, Carver. It may be that there is a bow you will be permitted to use."

"Thanks!" The boy followed her, and then turned to see his brother going the other way. "Adam?"

Hawke shrugged. "Well, I'm not a Warden. I'll stand with the King."

Their little band of dwarves was still near the base of the hill, setting up what traps and tripwires time would permit.

"Come on, durgen'len!" Maynriel shouted. "The darkspawn are closing in!"

Longer-legged hurlocks were in front of the pack. It was a mindless mob without organization or leadership. They saw the dwarves at the base of the hill and howled with bloodlust. Instantly the dwarves dropped what they were doing, and began a clumsy uphill scramble.

"Help them!" Merrill called out in her clear voice. "You there! And you! Pull them to safety!"



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Very surprised dwarves found themselves seized in strong, slender hands and hauled up the hill, with little regard for dwarven dignity.

Carver grinned at the sight, and then grew grim as the darkspawn grew closer. He could throw rocks, he supposed... "Here!"

Danith shoved a worn but serviceable longbow into Carver's hands. "Do you know how to use this?"

He had hunted from boyhood; and while not a legendary Dalish archer, he had done his part to feed his family. "I can get by."

"See that you do," she said primly. She tossed him a quiver of heavy, steel-tipped arrows, and busied herself with her own weapon.

"Ready!" shouted Maynriel. In startling unison, arrows were nocked, bows were bent, and a hundred elves took aim at the creatures rushing their way. More were in range; more were bursting from the hidden valley and rushing toward their makeshift fortress. Cailan and his knights watched the coming attack with excitement and frustration, every one of them wishing he had brought a bow.

"Steady... Wait for them!"

The darkspawn pounded on, their ugly faces now distinct. The trickle of the creatures had become a storm.

"Loose!"

A black cloud of arrows blotted out the blue of the sky. The air hummed and vibrated. The volley slammed into the



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darkspawn. A good quarter of them dropped in their tracks. Some fell, thrashing and scrabbling. Others, feathered like strange, evil birds, ran on, insensible to pain. Standing at the end of the bluff, Merrill screamed a war cry.

"May the Dread Wolf take you!"

Fire exploded from her upraised staff, and rained down on the darkspawn. Screams erupted from the staggered monsters, enveloped in flame. Up and down the line, elemental forces were unleashed on the ancient enemy: fire and ice; lightning and earthquake.

The dwarves peered from behind stony cover, mightily impressed. The King and his knights looked at the spectacle in astonishment; some like Cailan, with an admixture of delight and wonder; some others with horror and dread.

A few of the attackers reached the base of the cliff and set off the waiting traps. Lyrium bombs exploded in clouds of poisonous shrapnel, taking darkspawn down within a twenty-foot radius.

But more darkspawn were coming, drawn on by their murderous nature. A pair of unnaturally big genlocks rushed toward the hill, pushing heavy shields before them. At a distance, they simply looked like massive pieces of iron, scraping along the landscape like animated armor. Elven mages tried cold and paralysis spells on them in vain. The creatures barely broke stride.

"What *are* those things?" Carver shrieked at Danith, grabbing for another arrow. She shrugged, wide-eyed and

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busy. Another firestorm burst from Merrill's staff. Darkspawn spun and flailed. Some dropped, squawking; but the big ones with heavy iron shields kept coming, shrugging off Dalish arrows like falling leaves.

Merrill called out a freezing enchantment in her high, sweet voice. The big genlocks paused, slowing as if caught in tar. What turned others of their kind into blocks of ice was a temporary inconvenience, but at least it gave the archers better targets. They took aim, and shot at the faces under the wide-brimmed helmets. At exposed throats, too: a lucky shot changed one genlock's roar to a thick, slobbery whine. Still, they came on, and slammed into the base of the hill like farmboys hoping to shake ripe apples from a tree.

Rocks tumbled down on the attackers, dislodged by the force of the genlocks. Pebbles bounced off helmets; dust whitened the hideous faces. A frantic, frenzied mass of Taint swarm at the base of hill now: clucking, roaring, cackling.

More of the powerful, shield-carrying genlocks were coming. More darkspawn bowmen, too. They were hanging back, taking position. Arrows began whizzing up at the hill's defenders. A bold dwarf broke cover to throw a lyrium grenade down the hill, and was promptly shot: a quick, high shriek, followed by sobbing. His friends hauled him back, tugging at the arrow. The grenade rolled part of the way, was trampled on, and exploded. Bit of darkspawn flew sloppily into the air. One of the big genlocks sagged behind his shield and slowly toppled under the stamping feet.

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"Bring down the archers!" Maynriel shouted.

Carver spotted one — an ugly little skulking thing — and loosed an arrow at it. He missed it, and hit the Hurlock behind it just under the breastplate. Not the hit he had wanted, but not bad at all. The creature roared and yanked out the arrow in a thick spurt of blood. The blood kept spurting, and the bewildered creature sank to its knees and died. Carver grinned.

There's one down. Well done, Carver Hawke!

He nocked another arrow, and tried again for the bandy-legged genlock bowman.

The horde parted, a river divided; and up jogged a big Hurlock wearing a heavy horned helmet. It was the biggest hurlock most of them had ever. Cailan and his knights, however, had seen something just like this at the outset of the Bloomingtide battle. The Hurlock Vanguard bellowed unintelligibly, his sword pointed at the hill. With an answering roar, the darkspawn renewed their assault, smaller genlocks charging over the bodies of their dead, using the big shielded genlocks like stepping stones to leap at the hill and start scrambling up the slope.

Archers shot straight down into the the attackers. Dwarves lobbed grenades from cover. More darkspawn came on, crawling heedlessly over their dead.

"Well, my friends," Cailan said wryly, "it seems our swords will be needed sooner, rather than later."

The darkspawn swarmed up like ants to a honey pot.

Some fell, transfixed by arrows or ripped apart by grenades, but more and more were coming. They burst over the edge of the hill, shrieking, and threw themselves at the defenders. Some of the Dalish dropped their bows, drew swords and daggers, and threw themselves into the melee.

Wild hand-to-hand fights spread over the top of the hill. The king's knights closed in around him, back-to-back, a ring of bright steel. Cailan's eyes brightened with the thrill of battle. He swung his heavy greatsword in a shining arc, cutting a genlock in two. Merrill froze an attacker, and Cailan's blade shattered it into bloody shards. The king whooped with joy.

Carver unslung his sword as well, fighting off darkspawn that tried to attack the archers from behind. It was all confusion. He tried to stay alert, and not accidentally behead an ally. It was going to be tricky...

The darkspawn had encircled the hill now. A triumphant roar arose, signalling their discovery of an easier path to the summit on the north side. The Vanguard bellowed a command, and another wave rushed uphill.

Keen hawk eyes saw the crumpled figure on the high ledge. Below it surged a swarm of darkspawn baying for Grey Warden blood, their fingers clawing into rocky crevices. Unnoticed by the monsters, Morrigan alighted on the far end of the ridge and transformed.

Anders was moving only a little. He must have healed

himself over and over, but his strength was nearly gone. Her lips a straight line of exasperation, Morrigan cast a fireball into the mob of darkspawn at the base of the rockface, and followed it with a firestorm. Darkspawn squawked and ran from the blind valley, fanning the flames with every stride. Some noticed Morrigan now, and a few arrows came her way. She knocked them aside contemptuously, targeting the darkspawn that were too stupid and stubborn to stop trying to attack Anders.

Anders was *hers*. Anyone who tried to take him from her would regret it. These creatures before her would learn that lesson, and would pay with their lives for her inconvenience.

The survivors were already running away. Caught up in the call of Taint from the far hill, they joined the attack and forgot all about the lone Warden on the little ledge.

"Fool!" Morrigan snarled. The man was almost more trouble than he was worth. She called up her hawk form, and in a moment was at his side, working the limited healing magic she knew. As soon as he was well enough, they would fly back to Ostagar, no matter how dire the Fool King's situation.

"Adaia, we are going into *battle!*"

For nearly an hour, nothing that Tara, Cullen, Alistair, Zevran, or Leliana had said had made an impression on the little elf. Apparently nothing Bronwyn could say made a difference, either.

"I know," Adaia said sturdily, keeping pace with the quick-marching troops with no visible effort. "I'm a *Warden*."

"That's right," laughed Brosca, slapping her on the shoulder — carefully, not wanting to set off any of the volatile trinkets the girl bore. "You tell her. All you have to do is stand in the middle of the horde, and you'll blow them all the way back to the Stone!"

Adaia grinned fiercely. "I've got lots of poisons, too. Everybody come get some. I've slathered my knives with them!"

"All right," Bronwyn said. Short of ordering her back to camp, there was nothing to be done. Adaia had been conscripted and wished to serve. "If you are determined to a Warden, you must do this: kill at least one darkspawn, and fill this vial with its blood." She reached into a pocket and thrust the container into Adaia's hands. "And don't tell anyone else about it. That's what you have to do. After the battle, give the vial to me and we'll have a ceremony."

"Yes!" shrieked Adaia, punching the air with a small fist.

Bronwyn shook her head. No one had time or energy to talk much, for Loghain kept his forces moving at the trot. The scouting party had not been traveling particularly fast, nor was it difficult to track them. If the King could hold out, there was hope that Loghain's forces could effect a rescue. If not, perhaps they would be enough to exact revenge.

A pair of new-model ballistae, broken down to manageable pieces, were carried by their dwarven engineers. If the machines could help bring down a dragon, perhaps

they could help save a king.

His sword was unbearably heavy. Carver's blows were slowing, becoming sluggish. He used the weight of the sword to fight, letting it fall in controlled blows on his opponents. More darkspawn were coming up the north trail, now smoothed by dozens of darkspawn boots. Dalish bodies slumped here and there, hacked and bloody.

The shield-carrying genlocks had not reached them, thank the Maker, but plenty of their fellows had. The mages' voices were hoarse from shouting spells.

The earth shook: a deep vibration everyone felt from the soles of their feet to the top of their skulls. Darkspawn squealed and squawked and plunged out of the way of the monstrous being stamping up the hill.

"— *Ogre!*"

"— *Bring it down!*"

"— *Shoot it! Shoot it!*"

"— *Make save us! Nooo —*"

The ogre thundered toward them, boulder-like arms swinging; knocking elf, dwarf, and human aside like dolls. The mages did their best to slow it. Merrill had not finished her paralysis spell before she was thrown in the air, striking the ground hard.

"Merrill!" cried Cailan, rushing out of his formation to help her. Men cursed and leaped after him. The ogre pivoted, and mowed them down like wheat.

"To the King!" Ser Landry rallied the King's companions, and they charged in a body, shoving the ogre back with shields and pommel-strokes. The creature staggered, and then bellowed a challenge. A Dalish dagger, well thrown, struck it in the eye.

In agony, the ogre rampaged across the summit of the hill, smashing down anything in its path. Cailan stood his ground in front of the unconscious Merrill, and the ogre spotted him, reaching out with a giant fist. Cailan swung his sword, and it bounced off the ogre's breastplate. The ogre grabbed the king and lifted him off his feet, gloating over him. A trickle of thick drool trailed into Cailan's face.

Amid the screams of horror, Adam Hawke launched himself at the ogre, his blade driving hard in the monster's groin. The ogre grunted in surprise and then pain. Tainted blood spurted from an artery. Slowly, its hand opened, and Cailan dropped and scrambled away, wiping his face. He groaned and slumped to the ground, hand on his dented armor and cracked ribs.

It was a slaughter: the knights hacking, stabbing, slashing at the fallen creature. The ogre's death was a triumph, but the darkspawn came on, and kept coming. Instantly, the steel circle of warriors formed again, surrounding the fallen king.

An explosion crashed below. The air shone white, and sizzled briefly. The fighters paused, trying to assess the sound, and then the hill's defenders cheered.

Bronwyn said the King's people were still fighting, so they were not too late. They advanced on the darkspawn, hardly slowing their pace. Adaia followed her friends, a grenade in one hand and her good ironbark dagger in the other. She would help them fight darkspawn. Right. Some darkspawn were smaller than she was, after all.

On the edge of the battle, she found one of them: a short genlock archer, taking aim at the Wardens. Adaia crept up behind the creature and slit its throat. The poison on her blade mixed with the darkspawn blood, creating a sulfurous reek. Quickly, looking around for possible attackers, Adaia uncorked the vial and busied herself collecting the genlock's blood. That was the rule. A vial of darkspawn blood. Whatever. Adaia hoped they weren't just playing a joke on her.

Another genlock spotted her and squawked. Adaia tossed her grenade its way, then threw herself flat. The squawk stopped abruptly. The elf grinned to herself, face down in the dust. If she was quick and careful this should be *fun*.

Ballistae creaked and thumped. Bombs exploded. Curses shattered the earth and air. Archers loosed volleys, and warriors caught the darkspawn between the anvil of the hill and the hammer of Loghain's attack. Yard by yard, the darkspawn were crushed and slaughtered.

Bronwyn led her people against the strange darkspawn commander: the tall creature in the horned helmet. From the moment she crossed swords with it, she knew it for

something more than mere darkspawn. On however limited a level, this was a thinking creature.

And powerful. It swung a blade with as much strength as Sten. The Qunari side-stepped the blow, and slammed against the Vanguard in the midst of his follow-through. Not even Sten could knock the creature down, but he slowed it enough for other blades, sharp and envenomed, to reach its vitals.

Still the Vanguard fought. Its sword snapped in half, and the creature shoved the broken blade into Oghren's surprised face. The dwarf's helmet saved his life, but only just. Blood squirted from the torn mouth. Big white teeth flew sideways. Tara screamed a healing spell, and the bleeding slowed to a trickle. Oghren fell back, while Alistair threw up his shield, giving the creature a smart buffet. Cullen followed up with a downward blow that smashed the creature's armor and broke its collarbone.

"Bastard!" Bronwyn snarled, stabbing at the thing's eyes. "I'm sick of you!"

"Me, too!" Brosca agreed. She dove behind the Vanguard and gave an ankle a hard yank. The creature stumbled, and the back of its neck was briefly exposed.

It was enough. Sten roared, and swung his blade. It cut part way through the spine, and the horned helmet was knocked all the way off the Vanguard's head. It cannoned into Zevran, who sat down, winded.

"Braska!" the elf swore. Then he laughed, as Bronwyn

drove her sword into the thrashing darkspawn's throat. It twitched for some time, but finally was still. Brosca kicked it in the head.

With the Vanguard's death, whatever order and purpose the darkspawn had was gone. The horde disintegrated into mindless monsters fighting whatever lay before them. With no coordination, Loghain's forces mopped them up, and then advanced up the hill to the King.

The teyrn himself, his sword dripping red, was one of the first to the wide summit. Loghain eyed the aftermath dispassionately. The darkspawn had lost more than he had, which was always a good thing; and his army was in possession of the field, which was the traditional definition of victory. He pushed through to see if Cailan lived or not. The king was on the ground, but Keeper Merrill was murmuring over him, and the king's guard parted to let their general pass.

Cailan grinned up at him, knocked silly: boyishly pleased with himself.

"So, Loghain... who's King of the Mountain?"

Loghain bit back dark anger at the sight of Cailan on his makeshift stretcher. The walking wounded were limping back, helped by their friends. The worst cases were lying out in the Wilds, waiting for the wagons to retrieve them, guarded by a handful of soldiers, and cared for by a few Healers. Many of them would die out here.



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But it was good to be a King, even when squeezed and drooled on by an ogre. A mage named Petra was walking by the stretcher, waving her staff. Little Keili looked over anxiously, and cast a rejuvenation spell now and then, until Loghain's irritated expression gave her pause.

"Other soldiers need help," he growled. Of course she cast the next spell on him, but he wordlessly pointed at a dazed knight, staggering along with a bloody head wound. She nodded and sidled over to the man, her staff aglow. Then she moved on to Adam Hawke, who would henceforth have a faint but dashing scar across his cheekbone.

Bronwyn smiled to herself. Loghain narrowed his eyes. Her smile only sweetened.

"You have a loyal admirer."

"Complete rubbish."

"I should say, 'another loyal admirer,'" she teased. She saw he was genuinely angry and upset, and could not quite understand why.

"A gift from the heart does not deserve scorn, whether from a despised mage or mighty king. The girl means well, and is trying to serve her country in the only way she knows. The Chantry has seen to it that she has nothing but her magic to give, and they allow little enough of that as it is."

"I don't despise her," Loghain snapped. "I just don't like people fussing over me. Or over other people who have the means to care for themselves."

She followed his glance over to the royal procession. Adam



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Hawke was now walking on the other side of the king he had saved. Cailan reached out to shake his hand. Carver's brother was likely to profit handsomely from this day's work.

Oghren had found most of his lost teeth. One of the mages was spelling them back into his mouth. It was a fairly disturbing sight.

And Morrigan reported in: her face stony, her tone scathing. Anders had lured the darkspawn away with a diversion and had killed many of them. He had nearly been killed himself.


"And — " Morrigan noted acidly, "I did not see anyone coming to his assistance other than myself!"

Bronwyn laughed. "Who else would he need?"

Morrigan scoffed, only partly appeased. "We shall return to camp by ourselves, in stages, and I trust that Anders will be permitted to recover before performing any more ridiculous heroics!"

"Very well," Bronwyn assented smoothly. "And my congratulations both on your survival and all associated heroics. Very well done indeed!"

Another scornful huff, and Morrigan took to the skies in her hawk shape. She passed impudently close to Loghain's head, feathered wings ruffling his hair. Loghain glared irritably after the shape-shifter.



There was more fuss yet to be made over the king when they arrived at camp. Every Healer among the mages vied

to do the honors, but of course pride of place went to Wynne. Loghain ground his teeth in annoyance. Who knew how long Cailan would demand the woman's attention? She was desperately needed in Denerim. Anora needed her. Instead, she was likely to stay in camp, coddling Cailan; bandaging his insignificant cuts and bruises.

Cailan was in rather good spirits, and enjoyed making the most of his adventure.

"Well! Loghain! All's well that end's well, anyway! That's a few hundred of the creatures we'll never have to fight again! What shall we call today's battle? 'King's Mountain' sounds very well, I think."

"Indeed," Loghain answered dryly.

Cailan put out his hand to the Dalish Keeper.

"Merrill!" he said, eyes blue and radiant. "Your people fought most bravely – most honorably. I hope today strengthens the bonds between human and elf... between Fereldan and Dalish. I wish to say now, before all of you, that I mean to reward the courage and friendship of the Dalish with a free grant of land. It is time that the elvhen had a home once more, and I would be honored if they would consent to be our neighbors."

Merrill's delicate face was luminous with joy. "My King, nothing could give me greater happiness!"

There was a murmur of talk. Loghain felt his temper rising. What land was Cailan talking about? Where? Whose land was he giving away? Loghain hoped it

was something actually within the gift of the Crown of Ferelden. And a "free" grant of land? "Neighbors?" Did Cailan not mean to keep the overall sovereignty of that part of Fereldan soil?

"And Bronwyn!" the king called out, wincing as his gestures grew too taxing. "Come and drink to your Wardens' heroism! They've done their duty today!"

Bronwyn lifted her cup willingly enough. "I thank Your Majesty!"

"Yes!" Cailan drank with her. His eyes brightened with the first welcome swallow of good Antivan wine. "Danith and Carver! Our thanks to you!"

Bronwyn did not allow the frown inside to show. "And Anders, Your Majesty. His wounds, too, are being treated, but we shall not forget his brave deeds."

"Right. Warden Anders, of course. Elric, my good fellow, come over here..." Cailan whispered a few words in his friend's ear.

"Of course, Majesty," the man nodded, and went into the next room.

"For the three Wardens who stood with me today, a golden reward."

Elric returned, a small casket in his hand. He stood beside the king, and opened the lid. Inside gleamed rings of massive gold. A stir of appreciation hummed through the chamber.

"Bronwyn, take this ring to Warden Anders, with my thanks. He saved many lives today – probably mine among

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them. Warden Danith, this is probably much too big for the delicate hands of an elf, but I tender it with the deepest respect. And young Carver, I couldn't forget you. You're well on your way to a noble life of duty and heroism. Take this ring as my tribute to your good service. Though I'm cannot be surprised at your deeds, when you have such a fine example to guide you. Adam Hawke, come here."

Carver stepped back, his face a study of suppressed fury and exasperation. Bronwyn only smiled and put a friendly hand on his arm, making a point of admiring the ring. Carver slid it onto a finger, clearly upset. Recognizing the lad and then holding up his loved and envied brother as a model must be beyond galling. Carver managed more of a grimace than a smile, as his brother approached the king.

"Kneel."

In the golden circle of candlelight, Adam dropped to his knees at the King's side. Cailan struggled up on an elbow and rested his hand on Adam's head. He coughed, and cleared his throat.

"Revered Mother, I call on you to bear witness."

The stern-faced old woman stood forth. "I am here, Your Majesty."

Cailan looked around the room, eyes flicking to each face. "And I call on you, Lords of Ferelden, Lords of Orzammar, brave Elvhen, and Grey Wardens alike. Hear me: in the name of Calenhad the Great, here in the sight of the Maker, I declare this man a Knight of Ferelden." He man-

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aged a lop-sided smile. "Rise and serve your country, Ser Adam Hawke."

"He got a knighthood. A *knighthood!* And all I got was this lousy ring!"

"Shh! Carver!" Leliana ran after him, trying to hush him. "Oh, let me see! It's a splendid ring, and from the hand of the King himself. Such an honor!"

"*Rise, Ser Adam Hawke!* I think I threw up a little in my mouth."

"What is wrong?" asked Danith joining them in the Wardens' quarters. "You do not like your ring? It is good gold. I shall wear mine on a leather thong around my neck."

"Can I see it?" Brosca asked eagerly. "That's a nice bit of treasure! I wish the King had given one to me —"

"You can have it. Here." Carver shoved it at the delighted Brosca. Bronwyn came through from the little cubicle where Morrigan was alternately nursing Anders and raging at him.

"You can't give that away!" she said sharply. "It's a royal gift. Someone is going to ask you where it is. Brosca, give it back. We cannot afford to offend the King."

"Sodding ring," Carver muttered. Even more quietly, he added, "Sodding *king.*" Brosca made a face and shoved the ring back into the boy's big hands.

"Later, Boss," she said, making her escape from what she suspected would be a scene.

It was not.

"Excuse us. I need to speak to Carver. Over here," Bronwyn said, waving him over to the corner by the window. "Have a drink with me. Is it the knighthood? You already bear the title of Grey Warden. You cannot also bear the title of knight."

Carver exploded. "Adam manipulated the whole thing! He talked me into getting away from the King so I wouldn't attract the darkspawn to him with my Grey Warden-ness, and then he stayed and played hero, and now he's 'Ser Adam Hawke,' the perfect knight. I got a stupid ring."

"Carver," Bronwyn said thoughtfully, looking out the window, "I do know something about having an older brother. One of the first things I learned was that he was always going to be bigger and stronger than I. I learned that I was never going to be Teyrna of Highever, and that my brother would succeed my father. I learned that I would have to make my own way, by marriage or by politics or in the Chantry."

"Everyone says your brother is an decent man. Even Morrigan likes him."

"Yes," Bronwyn said dryly, "Everyone likes Fergus. I learned that early on, too. Except not *everybody* did, or his wife and son would be alive today. But still, he's Teyrn of Highever, and I'm not. I'm a Grey Warden, and that's all the title I'm likely to have. But a Grey Warden can save the world, and that is not something that a mere knight can do, nor a teyrn, nor even a King."

Streaks of purple lay softly on the horizon, mixed with dove grey and radiant pink. Bronwyn wondered if all the dust and debris of battle in the air was making the sunset more beautiful.

"That's true, I suppose," Carver said, shuffling restlessly. "I always wanted to do something different – something important, and I guess being a Grey Warden is just about the most different and important thing there is. But..." he burst out, "do you think the King will take Adam into his personal guard?"

"Maker! I hope not!" Bronwyn exclaimed. "I hadn't thought of that! I was hoping he'd go to Fergus and help him in the North." Unwillingly she thought of Wynne going alone to Denerim with no protector. Except she might not go at all if the King claimed her services. "Such a tangle," she sighed.

Cailan was indeed inclined to celebrate the knighting of his new friend Hawke, and would have had all his knights to dinner in his private chambers, had he been strong enough, and had Wynne not shooed all the visitors away, wanting her patient to get some sleep. Instead, Adam sat with the King's companions in the room just outside the King's bedchamber, matching them drink for drink.

Everyone else went down to the mess hall for their meal, celebrating the victory at what everyone now called "King's Mountain." Bronwyn smiled. It was hardly a mountain,



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but it was certainly a victory.

Most of the Wardens were cheerful as well. Adaia fidgeted, awaiting her Joining. The candlelit stone hall seemed to her more than beautiful. She had done something: really done something helpful and brave, and she was practically a Warden already.

They lingered long over food and drink. Leliana was persuaded to give them a few of the good old songs soldiers liked on these occasions. Bronwyn smiled at Loghain, who granted her a grave look that was not a scowl. It was the closest thing to a smile he could muster at the moment. He had thanked and congratulated his soldiers on a job well done. He had praised his allies, and commiserated with them over their casualties. The Dalish had performed superbly, and the Wardens had been in the right place at the right time, which was half the battle. A pity that Anders was not up to celebrating with them, for he had done more than anyone, but he would have a word himself with the man when he was feeling up to it. He had shown remarkable initiative and resourcefulness. Even that very shifty young witch had done well, no matter how suspicious her motives.

"So you're going to let that little elf Join. Do you think she'll live?"

"I don't know. We've been very, very lucky so far with our recruiting. I do know it would wound and grieve her if I forbade it. If she doesn't make it — well, it will soon be over,



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and she will be have died a Warden, at least. I hope she lives. She was very brave today. One doesn't always appreciate how hard it is for the small and weak to be brave."


"I suppose not."

A guardsman made his way through the maze of table to Loghain, leaning close and speaking softly. "Beg pardon, my lord. The King's Healer craves a word with you and the Warden Commander."

Bronwyn glanced up. "Is something wrong?"

"That's not for me to say, my lady," the man answered, distressed. "Come as soon as you can, if you please."

The Wardens were moving up to the quarters, anyway, so they used that as a kind of cover. Loghain touched Bronwyn's arm at the top of steps and they slipped away together.



Wynne cracked the door open and looked out anxiously. "What's wrong, Wynne?"

"Come and see for yourselves. He was so cheerful earlier this evening. He seemed to be healing well, but then... It's as I feared. One says as little as possible, of course. There's no use in frightening one's patient with dire possibilities, but..."

The king's knights were sitting over a card game, glum and red-eyed. Well-mannered men, they rose for Loghain and the Girl Warden. Loghain noticed Adam Hawke among them, already accepted as a peer.

Loghain asked harshly, "What is it?"

Elric Maraigne stared at the floor. "Blight sickness, my

lord. The King is grey with it."

Bronwyn caught her breath in a startled gasp.

Wynne pressed her lips together, and shook her head. Ser Landry wiped his face and said, "There's no use in wishing and hoping and pretending otherwise. The King's going to die."

Loghain pushed through to Cailan's bedchamber to see for himself.

The candles had burned lower. A haze of smoke dimmed the light. Cailan was sleeping restlessly, his head turning from side to side, his brow sweat-slick with fever. None of those things were as ominous as the King's grey and mottled skin.

Bronwyn whispered to Wynne, "How long as he been like this?"

"Not long. It came upon him suddenly. He was asleep when his breathing changed. I think he is having nightmares. I hoped it could be something else —"

"No," Bronwyn choked out. "This is Taint. I have seen it."

"Then he will die," Wynne sighed. She bowed her head, her lips moving in prayer.

"The Wardens know of nothing to help him?" Loghain demanded furiously. "After a thousand years, the Wardens know of *nothing* that will cure a man of the Taint? That Dalish Warden of yours was dying of Taint when you found her, and she still lives!"

"But she had to become a Ward —" She stared at Loghain at alarm "You can't mean... No! Loghain! It only works

half the time at best. And he would be a *Warden!*"

A crazy, impossible vision flashed before her imagination: Cailan under her command, disobeying her every order, swaggering like a man destined to save the world, when he ought to be flogged regularly instead... She shuddered.

Wynne came forward, hope in her eyes. "You can save the King by making him a Warden?"

"Shhh!" Bronwyn shut the door tightly. "Sometimes it works, but over half the people who join the Grey Wardens *die* in the process. And even at the best, it would make the King a Grey Warden!"

"He's going to die if you don't," Loghain growled. "And if it works, no one needs to know."

But they *would* know, Bronwyn thought despairingly. Cailan could not be kept from talking. He would boast to the skies that he was a Grey Warden. *Could* there be a Warden King? Would the Landsmeet stand for it?

Cailan stirred and opened his eyes. Bronwyn bit down hard on an anguished moan. The blue eyes Cailan had from his father Maric had faded, the irises turned a dull milky-grey. He was becoming a ghoul. A Warden King might be a political impossibility, but a Ghoul King was worse than an abomination.

"Loghain..." Cailan rasped out. "What dreams I've had... horrible..." He saw Bronwyn standing at Loghain's shoulder and managed a ghastly smile. "Hullo, Bronwyn. Is this what Grey Wardens have to put up with all the time? Duncan told

me about the nightmares... What is happening to me?"

"Cailan," Loghain told him bluntly. "You've been poisoned by the Taint. There's only one possible way to save you."

A quick gasp, and the King's sweaty grey face lightened with unbelieving hope. He beamed – shockingly – at Bronwyn. "You want me to Join the Grey Wardens!"

"I know of no other way to save you," Bronwyn admitted.

"A Grey Warden!" Cailan murmured, rapt. "How strange Fate is! It's what I've always dreamed of."

"Your Majesty," Bronwyn protested, "It might very well kill you."

Cailan did not appear to hear her. He whispered, "*Glorious!*"

Bronwyn stormed blindly up to the Wardens' quarters. Would the King live? If he lived, what would they *do* with him? Did they even have enough darkspawn blood for the ritual? She might have some left, preserved by Tara's spells, but would it do?

Adaia. Adaia had gathered a vial of darkspan blood today for her own Joining. Could she possibly ask that poor little girl to stand aside for the benefit of an arrogant human king? It seemed cruel and outrageous...

And what, after everything, if *it did not work*? Would the Grey Wardens be accused of murdering the King?

She paused, overwhelmed by the horror of that. It *could* happen, if they were not very, very careful.

Taking a breath, she pushed the door open.

"Wardens! To me!"

Eyes turned to her, some more quickly than others. People were chatting together, washing, reading – all in various stages of undress. Leliana was trimming Tara's hair. Brozca was helping Cullen clean his armor.

The little dwarf called back, "Are we going to have to fight again? Because I really, really hope not..."

Alistair emerged from the other room. "Bronwyn? He took another look at her face. "What's the matter?"

She gestured them closer and called out. "I need to speak to all Wardens right away. Those of you who are not Wardens I must ask to step into the other room for a few minutes."

Zevran grinned wryly, and swaggered into the next room. Bronwyn thought of Anders, and walked over to the little curtained corner.

"Excuse me," she said. "Is Anders awake and well enough to come out?"

Anders poked his head out, "He is."

"You are not," Morrigan contradicted crossly, behind him.

"It won't be very long," Bronwyn said looking the blond mage over. "You seem much recovered, and I have news that concerns all the Wardens. By the way, the King says thank you, and here's a thumping big golden ring from him. As for you, Morrigan..."

"I am going nowhere," the witch sneered. "I know all your ridiculous secrets – and perhaps some that even you do not know."

Alistair glared at her. They had never taken to each other, "You know, we really don't need to put up with this..."

Bronwyn lowered her voice. "Morrigan, I ask you as a friend not to undermine my authority. I don't doubt that Anders will tell you everything, but for now, just go. Or join the Wardens permanently."

"Very well. "'Tis all one to me!" Morrigan said, drawing a shawl furiously around her shoulder. She stalked into the next room, her back radiating contempt.

Anders tossed the heavy ring from hand to hand. "I'll give this to her. She likes jewelry."

"Can't I stay?" Adaia pleaded. "I'm almost a Warden!" A hesitant smile tugging at the corners of her mouth. "Is this about my Joining?"

Bronwyn sighed. "I wish it were. It's something else, and rather awful. I promise to talk to you in a bit." Adaia went away, disappointed. Bronwyn asked Alistair, "Where are Sten and Oghren?"

"Next door. Oghren's already passed out."

"Good," Bronwyn said without thinking. Grins bloomed around her like impertinent flowers. She grimaced, "Well... in this case, it is. I have something very serious to tell you. First of all: Tara, is any of the darkspawn blood we gathered weeks ago still viable?"

"I think so. Probably. There's not much of it — only a couple vials. The spells should have held all right."

Cullen caught on. "Someone else is Joining tonight? A

volunteer?"

Bronwyn refrained from rolling her eyes. It was all too dire. "Not exactly. Someone contracted the Taint during the battle. We will have to perform an emergency Joining to save him."

Alistair shook his head. "It was Duncan's policy that we had to stand back from those cases. If we tried the Joining with everybody who had Blight disease, it would give away our secrets."

Bronwyn sighed. "It isn't just *anybody*. I have been asked to perform a Joining for King Cailan."

A brief, shocked silence followed. Even Danith's eyes were wide, very wide, taking in the enormity of the situation. Everyone took a breath, and looked ready to start talking at once. Bronwyn put up a hand to fend them off, and was only partly successful.

Astrid, alive to the political implications, asked, "And what exactly would be the King's status were he to Join? Would he remain a King, or would he be a Warden recruit?"

"Andraste's bloody — " Anders began. Tara slapped a hand over his mouth, glancing at a stormy Cullen.

"Don't say it!" she hushed him. "Maybe... oh, Maker... this is big."

"It has never happened before," Leliana breathed. "Never. Not in all the history of Thedas. It has never happened that a King became a Warden. What a song it would make!"

"No songs!" Bronwyn interrupted sharply. "And no more

political talk! I charge you on your honor as Wardens, never to reveal this to anyone! We don't even know that the King will survive! He's pretty far gone already, to tell the truth."

"It was the ogre," Carver said instantly. "The ogre drooled all over his face. Maybe he swallowed —"

"Shut up!" Alistair burst out, "Just shut up!" He walked away and leaned against a wall, breathing heavily. Carver was offended, but Bronwyn caught his eye and gave her head a little shake. Leliana whispered in Carver's ear, and the boy's face changed. Bronwyn groaned inwardly. She should have known that Leliana would ferret out Alistair's secret. At the moment, she did not much care how she had.

Instead, she went on, "I don't want any more comments or interruptions. Every minute counts now. Tara, I need you and Anders to put together a Joining potion immediately. Then we will go to the King, but not all of us, because I think it would be very, very bad if things go wrong and people start speculating about a crowd of Wardens at the King's deathbed. Alistair and I will go, and no one else. We'll go as soon as the potion is ready. If the rest of you can manage to keep this secret, you can let everyone out of the other room. You can tell them that the King is sick, and to keep quiet about it. I'm going to put on a fresh tabard."

She walked away to rummage through her belongings. Tara followed her, and looked around to see if anyone else was listening.

"Bronwyn — maybe we should ask Adaia for her vial.

It's fresh. It might work better than the old stuff I've got. I don't know, of course. Nobody seems to really know much about how the process works. What do you think?"

A long pause. Then Bronwyn made up her mind, while tossing off the old tabard and donning the new. "I thought about it on the way up. All of you were Joined with preserved blood, so we know it works. Besides, asking Adaia for hers would be cruel. Not only are we delaying her Joining, but we would ask her for the vial she gathered after showing great daring and personal courage — which was, by the way, not noted or rewarded by the King. Would we then ask her to gather another, or force *her* to make do with the old blood? Humans have done her so much harm. I don't want to ask this of her. If the King were any other man we would not even consider it. He wants to be a Grey Warden recruit. Demanded it, in fact. Therefore, I shall treat him like any other recruit as far as possible. Mix the potion, and we'll find a way to take it to the King's room in secret. We can hardly walk past the King's knights carrying a steaming cup of darkspawn blood, for Maker's sake!

"Right," Tara said, a little distracted. "We'll mix it, and then we'll put it in a vial, so you can pour it into the cup in the King's own room. I imagine he has something fancy enough for a Joining."

"Maker preserve us!" Bronwyn groaned. "I can't leave the dregs of a Joining for anyone to find! They know we'd poisoned him for sure!"

The document lay on the King's writing table, signed, witnessed, and sealed. Loghain regarded it with loathing, torn between the desire to beat the wretched, dying boy over the head with it and the desire to throw the infuriating document into the fire. The king's sickbed was a carnival of visitors and confusion. Loghain glanced again at the parchment, a sour taste in his mouth. *"This is the last Will and Testament of Cailan Theirin, King of Ferelden..."*

Cailan clearly did not really believe he was going to die, or that it was even a possibility. He had listened to reason only so far as to leave Anora, as "Dowager Queen" – a term that enraged Loghain – on the throne as a caretaker for three months after his death.

" – at which time a Landsmeet shall be called to choose a new sovereign as it shall see fit – "

He refused to name a successor – whether Anora or some other – at all.

In fact, he gave Loghain a conspiratorial grin. "Are you hoping I'd name Fergus?" he nearly winked. Luckily he was too weak, for Loghain would certainly have knifed him for it. "That would certainly please Bronwyn," the King went on, fatuously. "Not that Fergus wouldn't be a sound choice," he added, more and more patronizing. "Don't worry about Anora. She's the Heiress of Gwaren, after all."

And what about the vague bequest to the Dalish elves? Merrill, luckily, was busily caring for her own people

and had not been notified of the King's sudden illness. Loghain would keep it that way. Cailan was in no shape to call for a map and be specific: he had merely designated an area southwest of Ostagar to be granted to the Dalish clans *"in perpetuity."* Could a king give away a portion of his kingdom without the consent of the Landsmeet? Or could he give away land that was beyond the borders, that was territory claimed by the Chasind tribesmen, protected by a prior treaty? What would happen when the Chantry insisted on sending missionaries there? In fifty, a hundred, two hundred years – it would be the Dales all over again. The King's will was a bomb, waiting to explode.

And there was no more hope of keeping the will a secret than there was of keeping the king's condition secret from the nobles. Loghain knew he had to summon Wulffe and Bryland and some of the senior banns, and had done so immediately. It was no longer possible not to send for the Revered Mother – the interfering old hag.

In addition to Loghain and the arls, Cailan had insisted on having his friends Elric and Landry witness the document – and also his new favorite, Adam Hawke. That done, many wished to make their farewells. As each individual or group had their audience, Loghain took the precaution of closing the door behind them. When Bronwyn arrived for her bit of Warden ritual, it would not seem so odd that the door would be closed, giving her privacy.

Loghain eyed Hawke. Bronwyn was sending some let-

ters north with him. There was no opportunity to speak privately with the man. He needed someone reliable to take the news to Anora, no matter what happened. Hawke was as good a choice as any.

Bryland and Wulffe were serious and concerned, as was proper; but they were also whispering to each other urgently, trying to stay on top of the situation. While Loghain awaited Bronwyn with growing impatience, the arls cornered him.

"So. That's Blight sickness, that is," Wulffe rumbled. "The King's sure to die."

"Maker forbid!" Bryland whispered. "But if he *does*, Loghain, we need to make sure the country doesn't fly to pieces. I thought that the King would name Fergus Cousland his heir outright, but it seems not so."

"Anora is Queen —" Loghain began heatedly.

"— For *now*," Wulffe growled. "That bit about the three months is a mercy. Of course, she could stay Queen if she marries the new King. The Couslands have the best claim by blood. Fergus is a widower now, and maybe that would be the tidiest solution all 'round."

"Yes!" Bryland agreed. "A bit of continuity and still a descendent of Calenhad on the throne. Unless —" he peered at Loghain intently — "you're backing another descendant of Calenhad. One whose claim is just as good as her brother's. Is that it, Loghain? You and Bronwyn? A lot of people would go for that, especially in the middle of a war..."

"Bronwyn is a Warden," Loghain countered.

Wulffe pursed his lips, considering. "No. No one's going to care about that with a Blight going on. The Girl Warden's that popular. Nice girl. Young. Probably good for a brace of heirs. Couslands always do their duty, after all. Make up your mind, Loghain, and talk to us. The three months will be over before we know it."

"Cailan's not dead yet," Loghain said sharply. "And I'd best get back to him now."

A soft knock, and Bronwyn slipped into the room. With her was Alistair. The boy's eyes met Loghain's, as if pleading to make everything better. Loghain put out a hand to still the murmurs of the grieving knights.

"Come, Wardens," he said. "The King wishes to speak to you." He stepped into the bedchamber and spoke to Wynne, "Privately."

The woman bowed in assent, understanding only in part.

The Revered Mother grimaced in distaste at the presence of a mage. Her droning prayers tapered off. Then she saw Alistair, and her eyes narrowed.

That's right, Loghain remembered. *The Chantry hierarchy seems to know who Alistair is, somehow. I expect that Eamon told them when he palmed the boy off on the Templars. Well, the lad is well out of their clutches.*

Loghain waved the Wardens into the King's bedchamber, and shut the door behind them. Alistair gasped at the sight of the King: half-asleep, and thrashing on the bed,

his face changing by the minute. The young Warden gave Loghain a quick, panicked look, and whispered to Bronwyn. "Is he staying? He can't stay! It's a secret —"

"Alistair," Bronwyn hissed back, "He *must* stay! Riordan told us that heads of state are privy to certain Grey Warden secrets. With the King in this condition, Loghain is as close to a head of state as no matter. There is absolutely no excuse those men out there would accept for leaving a dying King alone with two Grey Wardens. With Loghain here, we are simply two more making our farewells."

Alistair turned anxiously to Loghain. "You won't tell, will you? I mean, I know we can trust you, but this is really, really important..."

"Alistair," Loghain said patiently. "Of course I won't tell. I already swore an oath to Bronwyn. She's right. This can't be done without my presence — especially if the King does not survive."

"He's got to," Alistair muttered. "He's got to!"

Bronwyn pulled a little silver cup out from beneath her tabard and then the large vial of Joining potion. Loghain grimaced, stepping back, as the stink of Taint in the room redoubled.

Cailan opened his filmy eyes. Alistair gasped. They were now almost white.

"Alistair!" Cailan croaked. "Brother! No... at last... brothers indeed." His eyes traveled to Bronwyn, a cup in her hand. "Is that what I think it is?"

"Yes, Your Majesty," she said gravely. "It is time."

They must make this good, not just for Loghain, listening and judging, but for the King, who might die, or who might live to serve with them.

Bronwyn cleared her throat, and spoke softly. "The Grey Wardens were founded during the First Blight, when humanity stood at the verge of annihilation. So it was that the first Grey Wardens drank of darkspawn blood, and mastered their Taint. You, too shall drink: as the first Grey Wardens did before us, as we did before you. This is the source of our power... and our victory. We speak only a few words prior to the Joining, but these words have been said since the beginning. Alistair..."

With a visible effort, the young man pulled himself together. "*Join us, Brother: join us in the shadows where we stand vigilant; join us as we carry the duty that cannot be forsworn. Know that if you perish, your sacrifice shall not be forgotten, and that one day... we shall join you.*"

Bronwyn lifted the cup before her and said, "Cailan Theirin, you are called to submit yourself to the Taint for the Greater Good. From this moment forth, you are a Grey Warden."

Cailan smiled dreamily. "I always knew this was my destiny."

He struggled to sit up. Alistair put an arm behind his back, while Bronwyn put the cup to his lips. The king shuddered a little at the first swallow, but forced himself to drain the cup. Bronwyn stepped back and nodded to Alistair, who gently lowered Cailan onto his pillows. They watched, hardly

breathing, wondering what would happen next.

The king's eyes rolled back. He jerked up convulsively, his entire body wracked with spasms. A deep cough shook him, and then another.

"No..." Alistair moaned. "Oh, no! No!"

Loghain did not need more than a second to interpret that look of despair on Bronwyn's face. The cup dropped from her shaking hands and rolled madly under the bed. Loghain threw open the door and shouted, "Healer!"

Wynne dashed in at once, ahead of a surging mob of knights and nobles.

"Oh, Maker!" she cried. "Hold him, one of you. I can try this..."

The Revered Mother pushed her way to the front, indignant and suspicious. "Let me through! What is that mage doing to the King?"

Healing blue light surrounded Cailan, but it could not stop the dreadful, violent coughing. Cailan groaned horribly between the coughs, as if coughing out his very life.

It was, indeed, exactly what he was doing. It *hurt*, Loghain realized. He had been angry – so bitterly angry at Cailan – but it hurt horribly to see him – to *feel* him – die. He held Maric's son close, trying to offer whatever comfort was possible at the end.

"My lord," Bronwyn pleaded, "Stand back, I beg you. You will expose yourself to the Taint. Alistair and I will care for the King."

The word "Taint" was enough to discourage most of

the crowd. The rest shrank away from the terrible stench. Loghain held his friend's son, nonetheless; enduring the boy's last moments along with him, until a last, rattling gasp trailed away to nothing.

King Cailan was dead.

END OF VOLUME TWO





ON THE STORIES TOLD BY THE 'BLIGHT COMPANIONS':

Zevran's story is adapted from "*Masetto da Lamporecchio*," the first novel from day three of the *DECAMERON* by Giovanni Boccaccio.

Brosca's story was inspired by "*The Cat and the Mouse in Partnership*," collected by the Brothers Grimm.

Oghren story was adapted from a story within "*The Summoner's Tale*" by Chaucer.

Astrid's story is original with me, but is partly based on the gruesome fate of Beatrix Cenci, who was executed for the murder of her father after a lurid murder trial in 14th century Rome. Her father didn't attempt to marry her, but he did rape her. And then, as Leliana mentions, there is the French fairytale, "*Donkeyskin*."

Adaia's story is adapted from Andersen's "*The Little Match Girl*."

Bronwyn's story of Garahel is derived in part from canon, but embellished by me.

I decided to make Garahel a city elf because in *Dragon Age: Awakenings*, Velanna goes on about how the Dalish elves have no stories. This is complete rubbish, especially since the Warden might still have in her inventory *The Tale of Iloren*. However, the city elf in *DAO* also does not appear to know about Garahel until Duncan mentions him. Garahel should be Kind of a Big Deal Who Saved

the World a Lot. Perhaps he still is, in Hossburg and Starkhaven and points north. It's true that Garahel was never in Ferelden (as far as we know.)

Bronwyn has heard of him because she's highly educated and knows a lot of history. Also, she happened to "inherit" a biography of Garahel. It's possible that Garahel is not celebrated much because once he was gone, along with his charm and brilliant diplomacy and skill at arms, humans remembered mostly that he was very embarrassingly an elf. And perhaps he was not "elven" enough for the elves, since he was very much a unifier, who brought people together, and worked closely with humans (and probably with dwarves). The "*Ballad of Ayesleigh*," of course, is directly from canon.

The opening chunk of Danith's story is from the *Codex* entry: "*The Tale of Iloren*." The rest is mine.

And, on to chapter notes:

CHAPTER 4:

I am basing my Cailan somewhat on young Henry VIII: handsome, charming, athletic, popular, immensely vain, and utterly egocentric. Like many monarchs who came to the throne very young, he really believes that people want to do whatever makes him happy. He has no problem imagining that Anora will obediently step aside when he announces his plans to wed Empress Celene. Henry VIII was genuinely shocked and outraged

that Catherine of Aragon did not obey him meekly and admit that their marriage was incestuous and invalid. As George Bernard Shaw once wrote: *"Kings are not born: they are made by artificial hallucination. When the process is interrupted, as in the case of Charles II, the subject becomes sane, and never recovers his kingliness."*

I picture Maric more as our Charles II: a monarch ascending the throne after a childhood and youth of war, dispossession, and deadly danger. His charm, bonhomie, and to some extent his promiscuousness disguised his deep disillusionment and abiding melancholy.

CHAPTER 7:

Petty treason, in medieval law, was defined as an act of rebellion (including murder) against one's superior: for example, a wife who murdered (or planned to murder) a husband, a servant who rebelled against a master, a vassal who rebelled against an overlord. High treason is the betrayal of one's sovereign (or national government). Those who committed petty treason were liable to the same hideous punishments as those who committed high treason. Actually, in medieval England, women were almost never hanged, drawn, and quartered. Up until the time of Oliver Cromwell, the standard form of execution for a woman was burning alive (or beheading, for noblewomen). This changed with Cromwell and the Puritans, who changed the law to permit women the more humane death by hanging.

CHAPTER 9:

Leliana's song is adapted from CHILDE BALLAD 81, "MATTIE GROVES." I did not want to slow down the narrative, but here is the complete (revised) version:

A holiday, a holiday,
The first one of the year
King Arland's wife came to the Chantry
The priests' singing for to hear.

And when the chanting it was done
She went out the Chantry door
And there she saw Ser Kerran Loys,
And desired him full sore.

"Come home with me
Ser Kerran Loys,
Come home with me tonight.

Come home with me
My own true love,
And sleep with me tonight."

"Oh I can't come home,
I won't come home
And sleep with you tonight
By the gold ring on your finger
I can tell you are King Arland's wife."

"'Tis true I am King Arland's wife,
King Arland's not at home
He is out to the far Bannorn,
Bringing the taxes home."

And the servant who was standing by
 And hearing what was said
 He swore King Arland all would know,
 Before the sun would set.

Ser Kerran Loys, he lay down
 And took a little sleep.
 When he awoke, King Arland
 Was standing at his feet.

Saying "How do you like my feather bed
 And how do you like my sheets
 And how do you like my lady,
 Who lies in your arms asleep?"

"Oh well I like your feather bed
 And well I like your sheets
 But better I like your Lady Queen
 Who lies in my arms asleep."

"Get Up! Get Up!" King Arland cried,
 "Get up as quick as you can.
 Ne'er be it said in Denerim
 I slew a naked man!"

"Oh, I won't get up," Ser Kerran said,
 "I can't get up at all,
 For you have two long sharpened swords
 And I but a dagger small."

"It's true I have two sharpened swords,
 They cost me deep in the purse
 But you will have the better of them

And I will have the worst.

"And you will strike the very first blow
 And strike it like a man.
 I will strike the very next blow
 And I'll kill you if I can."

So Ser Kerran struck the very first blow
 And he hurt King Arland sore.
 King Arland struck the very next blow
 And Ser Kerran struck no more.

And then King Arland he took his Queen,
 He sat her on his knee
 Saying, "Who do you like the best of us,
 Ser Kerran Loys or me?"

And then spoke up his own dear Queen
 Never heard to speak so free,
 "I'd rather kiss dead Kerran's lips
 Than you and your finery."

King Arland he jumped up
 And loudly he did bawl
 He stuck his wife right through the heart
 And pinned her to the wall.

"A grave, a grave," King Arland cried,
 To put these lovers in;
 But bury my lady at the top
 For she was of royal kin."

CHAPTER 12:

King Henry VIII was very much afraid of being poi-

AUTHORS NOTES

soned, and did indeed institute the punishment of boiling alive for poisoners.

CHAPTER 15:

Caille en sarcophage is quail in puff pastry with truffles and foie gras. (Quail in a sarcophagus)

CHAPTER 16:

Since the Hawkes were not in Kirkwall to work off Gamlen's debts by indentured servitude, his creditors caught up with him. hence his flight to Ferelden.

COLOPHON

The layout and formatting of this document was created in Adobe InDesign. Interior decorations are from a variety of sources. Illustrations are from a variety of sources. Several were done in the DAZ Studio and composited and postworked in Photoshop. Dragon Age Art is used with permission of Electronic Arts, Inc.

Fonts used in this project are: the Journal family, from Emigré foundary for body text. Titling and chapter headings are set in Quasimodo, from David Nalle of the Fontcraft Scriptorium. Story Titles are Solemnity, by Harold Lohner. Story text is Romic Light by Esselete Letraset. Drop caps are by Marwan Aridi.

Special mention should probably also be extended to Jack Davis and Linea Dayton for their efforts in producing The Photoshop 7 One-Click WOW Book.

Graphics design by J. Odell (J0del@aol.com)